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“It’s Not All Cupcakes and Lollipops”:  
An Investigation of the Predictors and Effects of Prison Visitation  
for Children during Maternal and Paternal Incarceration

by  
Melinda Tasca

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to better understand the factors associated with, and effects of, prison visitation for children during maternal and paternal incarceration. As gatekeepers, caregivers play a pivotal role in the facilitation of parent-child prison visitation. Yet, some caregivers may be more likely to take children to visit than others. Additionally, among those children who do visit, visitation may be positive in some ways and negative in others. To advance prior work, this study (1) assesses the relationship between caregiver type and parent-child prison visitation and (2) investigates the emotional and behavioral responses of children who visit.

The current research uses mixed-methods and is carried out in two phases. For Phase 1, quantitative data on 984 children collected from structured interviews with incarcerated parents (N=279 mothers; N=143 fathers) in the Arizona Department of Corrections are used to examine the relationship between caregiver type and the likelihood of parent-child prison visitation. Descriptive statistics and logistic regression analyses are conducted separately for maternal and paternal incarceration. Phase 2 draws on caregivers' accounts of 40 children who visit their parent in prison to assess children's emotional and behavioral reactions to visitation. Data are coded to identify positive and negative responses, "visitation paradox" indicators, prior life circumstances and child age. Thematic content analyses are conducted to capture major themes.

Analyses from Phase 1 confirm a significant relationship between caregiver type and mother-child and father-child visitation. Other factors that affected the likelihood of

parental visitation included child situational factors, parent stressors, institutional barriers and child demographics, although these effects differed depending upon which parent was in prison. Results from Phase 2 revealed overwhelmingly negative responses among children to parental prison visitation. Key themes that accounted for child reactions included institutional context and parental attachment.

This research adds to the collateral consequences of incarceration literature by providing greater insight into the imprisonment experience for vulnerable families. Further, these results have direct implications for correctional policy and practice pertaining to the manner and regulation of prison visits and also inform reentry efforts through a family-centric approach.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

As mass imprisonment transformed from a movement into a staple in American society over the past three decades, scholars have begun to document its broad reaching effects on prisoners, children, families and communities (Arditti, 2012; Clear, 2007; Murray & Farrington, 2008a; 2008b; Petersilia, 2003; Pratt, 2009; Travis & Waul, 2003; Turanovic, Rodriguez & Pratt, 2012). A major take away from this growing body of work is that imprisonment is a complex and often taxing process for those who experience it directly or indirectly. Specifically, the collateral consequences of incarceration literature shows us how the cyclical nature of imprisonment contributes to the deterioration of families in poor, predominately minority neighborhoods (Clear, 2007; Foster & Hagan, 2007; Wildeman, 2014) and how the punishment prisoners receive extends well beyond their prison terms through disenfranchisement in the realms of employment, housing, and parental rights (Alexander, 2010; Manza & Uggen, 2006; Western & Muller, 2013). This body of work further illustrates how children of incarcerated parents—often referred to as “the hidden victims of the prison boom” (Petersilia, 2005, p. 34)—experience a cascade of emotional, behavioral, structural and economic difficulties in their lives (Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper & Mincy, 2009; Murray, Janson & Farrington, 2007; Tasca, Turanovic, White & Rodriguez, 2014; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011; Wildeman, 2014).

Despite the great strides that have been made, we still know relatively little about family members’ connections to incarcerated men and women *during* imprisonment (Turney, 2014). Given that the majority of prisoners are mothers and fathers to minor

children, understanding the predictors and effects of in-prison parent-child contact (e.g., prison visitation) are important for research and policy alike. Specifically, decisions to remain connected to an imprisoned parent (or not) can have ramifications for family functioning and child well-being in both the short and long terms.

In an effort to situate parental prison contact within the broader collateral consequences of incarceration literature, it is important to first understand the scope of American imprisonment. Due to nationwide efforts initiated in the 1980s to “get tough” on offenders—particularly drug offenders—America experienced an unprecedented prison boom that is still in full swing today (Alexander, 2010; Mauer, 2006; Pratt, 2009; Provine, 2011; Tonry, 2011). The reliance on incarceration as the chief policy response to crime resulted in a sevenfold increase in the prison population (Western, 2006; McShane, 2008). This has resulted in a rate of incarceration that is higher than the rest of the world (Owen, 1998). In fact, it is estimated that the United States incarcerates its citizens at rates of up to fifteen times higher than those of other Western nations (Tonry, 2011). While the majority of prisoners are men, the rate by which female imprisonment has grown in recent years has surpassed that of their male counterparts. Specifically, since 1991, male incarceration rates have increased by 77% whereas female rates have increased by 131% (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). This surge in incarceration has generated a population of male and female prisoners that is largely poor, African American or Latino/a, and most of whom are parents of minor children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Lenox, 2011; Western & Muller, 2013).

Since the majority of prisoners are parents, current incarceration practices have inevitably touched the lives of a substantial number of children. The latest Bureau of Justice Statistics report estimates that nearly two million children have a parent incarcerated in the state or federal prison system; this accounts for approximately two percent of the total minor population in the United States (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Some scholars posit that this figure may even underestimate the actual number of children with an incarcerated parent in that the number of children who experience parental imprisonment is not systematically collected by correctional institutions, schools, child welfare agencies, or other public systems (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper & Shear, 2010). The bottom line is that a large segment of American society—predominately poor, minority families—has experienced incarceration in some way. What this means for family functioning, ability to remain connected, and the well-being of children during the parent’s imprisonment deserves further empirical and policy attention.

One meaningful way for families to remain connected during incarceration is through prison visitation. In light of rising incarceration rates and increasingly lengthy prison sentences, there is great debate surrounding how prison contact occurs, who regulates contact, and the effects of contact on children (Arditti, 2005; 2012; Poehlmann et al., 2010). While letters and phone calls are also available contact methods, the quality of these forms of communication are arguably inferior to what in-person contact can provide (Christian, 2005; Murray & Farrington, 2006). A prison visit provides a face-to-face opportunity to maintain or rebuild relationships disrupted by imprisonment and other

prior life stressors (Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Maruna & Toch, 2005; Snyder, 2009). In other words, prison visitation may be considered a “reset” button for prisoners, caregivers, and children as they attempt to settle the past, discuss the present and plan for the future. At the same time, however, prison visitation can be an arduous undertaking—emotionally, physically, and economically—for children and caregivers (Arditti, 2003; Arditti, Smock & Parkman, 2005; Christian, 2005; Christian & Kennedy, 2011). Estimates reveal that between one-fourth and two-thirds of children visit their parent in prison (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Poehlmann, Schlafer, Maes & Hanneman, 2008). Why some children visit, and how children who visit their incarcerated mothers and fathers fare, remain open questions and thus, are the focus of this dissertation.

### **Caregiver Type and Prison Visitation: The Notion of Gatekeeping**

In considering what factors account for parent-child prison visitation, it is important to note that children cannot visit alone. Caregivers—whether consciously or not—become gatekeepers of the child's relationship with an incarcerated parent (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Swanson, Chang-Bae, Sansone & Tatum, 2013; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). Caregivers are in a pivotal position as they may facilitate a relationship between the children and their parent via prison visitation or prohibit such contact all together (Cecil, McHale, Strozier & Pietsch, 2008; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Roy & Dyson, 2005). The children, in turn, are dependent on their caregiver's actions to nurture or inhibit that relationship (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Poehlmann, 2003; Swanson et al., 2013). National statistics indicate that far fewer children with an incarcerated parent live

in foster care than live with the other parent or another relative such as a grandparent (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). As such, most decisions about a child's contact with an incarcerated parent are made by a family member rather than by a children's court judge or social worker (Poehlmann et al., 2010).

The living situations of children vary depending upon whether a child experiences paternal or maternal incarceration. While incarcerated fathers rely on their children's mothers to maintain contact with children during their incarceration (Roy & Dyson, 2005), mothers' contact with children is enabled most often by grandmothers (Cecil et al. 2008). As Pollock (2002) observed, "visitation rooms in women's prisons are mostly filled with family members (typically mothers); visitation rooms in men's prisons are usually filled with wives and girlfriends" (p. 111). Surprisingly, however, no study to date has empirically investigated the relationship between caregiver type and the likelihood of prison visitation between children and their incarcerated mothers and fathers.

For reasons that will follow, mothers (during paternal incarceration) and grandmothers (during maternal incarceration) are hypothesized to be the most likely to take children to see their incarcerated parent rather than other caregivers, despite the challenges in doing so. Other caregiver types (e.g., relatives, non-relatives, state placements) differ significantly from mother and grandmother caregivers along a number of dimensions including economic status, cultural beliefs and expectations surrounding parenthood. Additional differences exist across caregiver types with respect to legal restrictions set by courts that influence prison visitation (e.g., children in foster care)

(Arditti, 2012; Beckerman, 1989; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Kruttschnitt, 2011; Roy & Dyson, 2005).

While mothers and grandmothers most often care for children during maternal and paternal incarceration, their role as the most probable facilitator of prison visitation between prisoners and their children is much more complex. Mothers and grandmothers often maintain an unfettered belief in the value of a parent-child relationship, for the child's benefit (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Einat, Rabinovitz & Harel-Aviram, 2013; Fuller, 1993; Gleeson & Seryak, 2010), but also for their own reasons as they have a vested interest in prisoners assuming parental roles upon release—above and beyond that of other caregiver types (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Einat et al., 2013; Roy & Dyson, 2005; Roy & Burton, 2007). The mothers and grandmothers of prisoners' children are rarely well situated. In fact, mothers and grandmothers are arguably the most burdened of all child caregivers (Tuerk & Loper, 2006). Research has documented the great burdens they carry with respect to material hardship, residential instability, and caring for children with few resources to meet their growing needs (Arditti & Few, 2006; Geller, Garfinkel & Western, 2011; Phillips, Erkanli, Keeler, Costello & Angold, 2006; Tasca, Rodriguez & Zatz, 2011).

Even when a mother's or father's incarceration has had little impact on the current status of the family—as many of these parents were absent from their children's lives prior to incarceration due to an inability or unwillingness to parent, substance abuse, or mental health problems—mother and grandmother caregivers often view the imprisonment period as a means to start anew (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Christian &

Kennedy, 2011; Day, Acock, Bahr & Arditti, 2005; Einat et al., 2013). As gatekeepers, these caregivers are in a unique position to make demands of the prisoner regarding their future parental roles and responsibilities (Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Einat et al., 2013; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Roy & Dyson, 2005). In an effort to alleviate the burdens they have been bearing on their own, prison visitation serves as the prime opportunity for mothers and grandmothers to jumpstart the parent-child relationship and lay out a game plan for how life is supposed to be upon the prisoner's release (Arditti, 2012; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Visher, 2013). The power that these caregivers hold as gatekeepers during the prison period—often the only time they maintain such control over the prisoner—coupled with grandmothers' and mothers' desire for change in their current circumstances gives rise to “idealized expectations” surrounding parenthood (Comfort, 2008; Day et al. 2005; Einat et al., 2013; Roy & Dyson, 2005). The facilitation of parent-child prison visitation by mothers and grandmothers serves as the means by which this process unfolds.

### **Prison Visitation and Child Responses**

In addition to examining factors associated with the likelihood of parent-child prison visitation, it is equally critical to gain insight into what prison visitation means for child well-being. Parent-child separation as a result of imprisonment may generate emotional and behavioral problems among children because it is often unanticipated, disruptive and unexplained (Dallaire, 2007b; Poehlmann, 2005b). Prison visitation may alleviate or exacerbate these challenges. The limited literature available, however, is mixed in terms of whether visitation is beneficial or harmful for children. On one hand,



some studies indicate that children who visit their imprisoned parent have reduced anxiety surrounding their parent's absence, exhibit fewer problem behaviors and have improved relationships with their parent (Block & Potthast, 1998; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Poehlmann et al., 2010). By contrast, other studies have pointed out that visitation can invoke negative emotional and behavioral responses in children given their exposure to various stressors in order to maintain contact with an incarcerated parent, such as commuting far distances, and having to come to terms with leaving their parent behind once the visit has ended (Dallaire & Wilson, 2010; McDermott & King, 1992; Peart & Asquith, 1992).

There are two primary theoretical perspectives that may account for the contradictory findings of prior work on prison visitation and child well-being: attachment theory and secondary prisonization. Attachment theory focuses on parent-child interactions that contribute to children's close relationships and well-being across the life span (Boss, 1999; 2004; Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980; Harvey, 2002). It is often maintained that parental incarceration is harmful for children due to the child's separation from the parent (Bowlby, 1973; Deck, 1988; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen & Kennon, 1999; Poehlmann, 2005b). From an attachment standpoint, if a child does not have sufficient contact with an attachment figure, the child may experience emotional and developmental difficulties, hostility and withdrawal, and an inability to maintain long-term interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980; Deck, 1988; Poehlmann, 2005b). Hence, from this perspective, prison visitation is a way to ease any

negative feelings surrounding parental absence during incarceration, thereby potentially reducing negative emotional and behavioral responses among children.

Alternatively, the secondary prisonization perspective focuses on the way in which the stressful institutional environment that family members are forced to navigate in order to visit their incarcerated loved one is often degrading, intimidating and results in family members' defined as "quasi-inmates" (Arditti, 2012; Comfort, 2008; Hairston, 1998). Such treatment can invoke negative reactions among prison visitors—particularly children. From a secondary prisonization perspective, parent-child prison visitation is harmful for children given the harsh conditions of the correctional institution itself (Arditti, 2003; Comfort, 2008; Dallaire, Wilson & Ciccone, 2009). Considered together, it may be that prison visitation is positive for children in some ways, while negative in others—hence, the "visitation paradox" (Arditti, 2012). Still, the "visitation paradox" alone does not fully capture the nuances associated with how children who visit an imprisoned parent are affected by the experience. In particular, prison visitation does not occur in isolation from pre-incarceration stressors that might play a role in how children respond. Additionally, the effects of visitation on children are likely "age-graded" in that the age of the child might influence how he or she responds to visitation with an incarcerated parent (Poehlmann et al., 2010). To that end, in order to fully tap into the effects of visitation on children, it is necessary to consider "visitation paradox" factors, pre-incarceration life circumstances and child age.

## **Research Purpose and Significance**

Guided by prior research, this dissertation investigates two main research questions. First, I examine children's connection to their incarcerated mothers and fathers, focusing on the influence of caregiver type in the facilitation of parent-child prison visitation. Given that I expect differences in caregiver type depending on which parent is in prison, I examine these relationships separately for children experiencing maternal and paternal incarceration. Specifically, I quantitatively address the following questions:

### Paternal Incarceration

1. Are children experiencing paternal incarceration more likely to visit their father in prison when the primary caregiver is a mother rather than a different caregiver, net of relevant controls?

### Maternal Incarceration

2. Are children experiencing maternal incarceration more likely to visit their mother in prison when the primary caregiver is a grandmother rather than a different caregiver, net of relevant controls?

Second, I examine the behavioral and emotional responses of children who visit their incarcerated mothers and fathers by qualitatively exploring the following questions:

3. What role do "visitation paradox" factors (i.e., parental attachment, secondary prisonization) play in how children respond emotionally and behaviorally to prison visitation, as perceived by caregivers?
4. How do pre-incarceration life circumstances (e.g., stressors) influence children's emotional and behavioral responses to prison visitation with an incarcerated parent, as perceived by caregivers?
5. How does age affect children's responses to prison visits?

Understanding caregivers' facilitation of prison visitation and its impact on children can shed light on the functioning of vulnerable families in the era of mass

incarceration. Visitation provides a window into which researchers can glimpse how families remain connected and what such connections mean for children during what are often lengthy periods of parental confinement.

Sadly, the mass incarceration movement in its efforts to get tough on crime, also got tough on children and their caregivers—particularly mothers and grandmothers (Lenox, 2011; Lynch, 2012; Phillips & Bloom, 1998). The punitive nature of imprisonment extends beyond the actual prisoner to the family members themselves, and as a result family connectedness becomes exceedingly difficult and potentially even harmful for visitors, including children (Arditti, 2012; Christian, 2005; Swanson et al., 2013). Prison visitation can become an overwhelming process for already taxed caregivers and children. Given this, one could ask, why even bother with visitation? It is contended here that mothers and grandmothers are the most likely caregivers to facilitate father-child and mother-child visits despite the obstacles in doing so. Indeed, these caregivers *need* the prisoner to fulfill their family responsibilities upon release as mothers and grandmothers are often overwhelmed caring and providing for the children alone.

Subsequently, the visitation room becomes the only family "intervention" available in a system that has closed the door on rehabilitation. Families are forced to attempt to hit a "reset" button without the adequate tools or resources to overcome ongoing familial stressors related to financial hardship, prisoner's substance use, mental health problems and repeated criminal justice involvement. The prison visitation room is the setting by which this "reset" process can take place. At the same time, however, it is important to note that such attempts to "reset" the past and maintain or reestablish

connections by caregivers during a parent’s imprisonment can have important implications for children. Whether the consequences of such efforts are positive or negative for children, however, is unclear from prior research.

For both research and policy purposes, we should care about who visits, the taxing circumstances that are inherent in doing so and what visitation means for child well-being. Such an understanding will allow us to paint a more complete picture of the consequences of mass incarceration among complex family systems with multifaceted needs. In particular, a focus on caregiver type in the examination of factors associated with parent-child prison visitation can identify family systems to be targeted in reentry initiatives. Since family support is a key component of successful reentry (Visher, 2013), it is critical that individuals most entrenched with the prisoner during his or her incarceration are included in the post-release transition plan. In consideration of the burdens caregivers carry and the various expectations placed on prisoners upon release (particularly with respect to parenthood), a family systems focus in reentry could enhance family functioning. As a result, prisoners and their families may cope more successfully with the realities of life after incarceration.

Moreover, my focus on the effects of prison visitation on children advances prior work both empirically and theoretically. Specifically, no study to date has fully examined the “visitation paradox” (Arditti, 2012), as the limited research on visitation effects for children generally focuses on either attachment or secondary prisonization perspectives but not both. This analysis takes the “visitation paradox” a step further by capturing prior life circumstances and potential age-graded effects in assessing what visitation means for

children. From a policy perspective, tapping into children's responses to visitation can help to inform prison visitation policies and practices (e.g., video visitation) and determine whether visits help or hurt children coping with parental incarceration. In short, the current research speaks more broadly to the vulnerable family systems experiencing incarceration, by assessing the ways in which they connect, and the implications of such connections for the children left behind.

## Chapter 2

### Theoretical Framework

In the following chapter, I highlight important theoretical contributions of the collateral consequences of incarceration literature by situating my work within the broader political and historical contexts of mass imprisonment. This is followed by a discussion on the impact of tough-on-crime policies for prisoners, children and families. Next, I outline the ways in which correctional institutional policies have paralleled the larger “get tough” movement, thereby creating significant obstacles to parent-child visitation. These two sections lay the theoretical groundwork for the crux of the dissertation. Then, I discuss how despite the vulnerable status of families who experience mass imprisonment, as well as the punitive nature of prison visitation policies, parent-child visitation will be dependent upon caregiver type; and the type of caregiver differs by whether it is a mother or a father incarcerated.

Second, using attachment theory and secondary prisonization as frameworks, I describe how prison visitation may be both beneficial and harmful for children in consideration of Arditti’s (2012) notion of the prison “visitation paradox”. I take this one step further by outlining why it is important to consider prior life circumstances and child age in assessing how children respond to prison visitation. Finally, I summarize and conclude this chapter by discussing the ways in which this research extends empirical and theoretical inquiry into the broader consequences of mass incarceration for children and families in terms of their abilities to remain intact through prison visitation, and how children fare as a result.

## **Political and Historical Context of Mass Imprisonment**

In order to understand how and under what circumstances children remain connected to an incarcerated parent through prison visitation and what prison visitation means for child well-being, one must first trace how incarceration has infiltrated family life through the rise of mass imprisonment. Historically, America has undergone several philosophical shifts in its approach to punishment. While early approaches were rooted in religion, the 20<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to the Progressive Era, which embraced a rehabilitative ideology that centered on individualized intervention in the treatment of offenders (Pratt, 2009). In an effort to achieve these goals, indeterminate sentencing schemes provided broad discretionary power to judges to “individualize” sentencing of offenders (Pratt, 2009; Provine, 2011; Tonry, 2011). In the late 1960s, however, dramatic spikes in crime rates—particularly violence—coupled with the release of Martinson’s (1974) bleak evaluation of the effectiveness of treatment interventions, led the public to question whether rehabilitation really “works” (Cullen, 2007; Cullen & Gendreau, 2000; Pratt, 2009; Walker, 2010).

At the same time, liberal and conservative policymakers alike began to rethink the notion of indeterminate sentencing. Instead, they instituted a system of determinate/fixed sentences and largely eliminated discretionary parole release (Lynch, 2012; Pratt, 2009). Although both liberals and conservatives were in favor of these reforms, their support was for vastly different reasons. For instance, liberals argued that the unfettered discretion afforded to criminal justice officials led to “lawlessness” (Frankel, 1972) in sentencing and resulted in discriminatory practices, particularly against poor minorities.



Alternatively, conservatives viewed policies stemming from the rehabilitative philosophy as too lenient or “soft” on crime. In the end, both sides agreed that the newly instituted reforms would alleviate their criticisms (Cullen, 2007; Tonry, 2011). Little did the public or policymakers realize that these policy changes would have unintended and profound ramifications for children and families in the decades to come.

During this period, politicians recognized that it was to their benefit to campaign on the public’s fear of crime and waning support for rehabilitation. Conservatives began to openly dismiss the notion that crime could be rooted in structural factors, arguing instead that crime was fueled by culture, especially black culture (Alexander, 2010; Provine, 2011; Tonry, 2011). Although Nixon initiated the “war on drugs,” Reagan gained public support to fully wage it through the use of implicitly racial terms like “gangbangers,” “crack whores” and “welfare queens” to play into fear of minority crime (Alexander, 2010).

At the time the war was initiated, fewer than two percent of Americans perceived drugs to be a top national priority; however, by 1986, leading news outlets labeled “the crack epidemic” to be the most important issue of the year (Alexander, 2010; Tonry, 2011). The political framing and media portrayal of the crack epidemic reinforced widespread racial stereotypes which paved the way for a cascade of tough-on-crime policies that produced racially disparate outcomes in every stage of the criminal justice system (Beckett, Nyrop & Pfingst, 2006; Beckett, Nyrop, Pfingst & Bowen, 2005; Mann, Zatz & Rodriguez, 2006). In turn, these policies produced unintended consequences for

the stability of families and the well-being of children among the most marginalized in our society (Arditti, 2012; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010; Wildeman, 2014).

To ensure that the war on drugs would be enforced, the federal government provided local, state and federal police departments with generous incentives (Lynch, 2012). Specifically, Congress passed the Military Cooperation with Law Enforcement Act, which allowed for the use of military resources by police agencies for the purpose of fighting drug crime (Alexander, 2010). Between 1980 and 1984, FBI drug enforcement funding grew from \$8 million to \$95 million. And, the Reagan administration even permitted police departments to retain a large portion of money and assets obtained during drug enforcement operations (Alexander, 2010; Tonry, 2011). These large-scale efforts had devastating impacts on family formation and stability in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Indeed, drug enforcement in these areas removed countless numbers of minorities—many of whom were parents—from community and family life (Clear, 2007; Rose & Clear, 1998; Western, 2006).

Given the racial undertones in the political campaign for the war on drugs, it was no surprise that the war was waged almost exclusively in marginalized minority neighborhoods (Walker, Spohn & DeLone, 1999). As the influential work of Beckett and colleagues (2005; 2006) in Seattle revealed, it is easier for police to target inner-city minorities given the prevalence of publicly visible drug markets, whereas in white communities drug transactions tend to take place indoors. In addition, Tonry (2011) argues that police can more easily infiltrate social networks to make drug arrests in disadvantaged areas than in cohesive, better-resourced white communities. Since police

focused their efforts on inner-city communities, inevitably this led to higher rates of arrests and incarceration of minority residents for these crimes (Beckett et al., 2005; 2006). In fact, the enforcement of this war led to a threefold increase in the number of drug-related arrests between 1970 and 2003—the largest contributor to the surge in imprisonment rates (Walker, 2010).

Yet, arrest rates do not follow the same pattern as use rates (Alexander, 2010; Tonry, 2011). Notably, there is no empirical support to suggest that law enforcement crackdowns that are waged in inner-city neighborhoods (primarily against users and low-level sellers) have produced long-term reductions in the overall drug trade (Walker, 2010). What this strategy has produced, however, is racially disparate outcomes in the likelihood of arrest and incarceration for drug offenses (Alexander, 2010; Beckett et al., 2005; 2006). The drug war is a primary contributor to the deterioration of families among the already vulnerable, as evidenced by the growing body of work that demonstrates the harmful effects of parental imprisonment on children and families (Arditti, 2005; 2012; Nurse, 2002; Poehlmann et al., 2010; Turney, 2014; Western & Muller, 2013).

To add to the problem, the tough-on-crime movement was waged at a time when disadvantaged communities were in a period of deep social and structural change. Wilson's (1987) influential work, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, traces the way in which inner-city communities were rocked by deindustrialization. Consequently, minority residents were isolated from what jobs remained in the manufacturing sector given the relocation of this industry to other parts of the city. Prior to the 1970s, inner-city residents with little education and few job skills could obtain industrial positions in their

neighborhood; this was no longer the case. As revealed by Wilson (1987), the number of employed non-white males per 100 women has steadily declined since 1960, particularly among men under the age of 25. The drop in lawful employment prospects among minorities trapped in the inner city amplified incentives to sell drugs—markedly crack cocaine (Anderson, 2010; Tonry, 2011). Subsequently, minorities in these communities became prime targets of law enforcement and tough-on-crime penalties. They experienced imprisonment and its consequences at disproportionately higher rates than whites, largely as a result of the policies that stemmed from the war on drugs (Lenox, 2011; Provine, 2011; Tonry, 2011; Walker, 2010; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010; Western, 2006). In consideration of what this means more broadly, it is clear that these factors can wreck havoc on families’ abilities to remain intact and can affect the fates of prisoners’ children.

The shift away from rehabilitative ideals toward a more punitive punishment philosophy coupled with the creation and enforcement of the war on drugs produced two key crime control strategies that has implications for children and families: (1) mandatory penalties and; (2) sentencing structure changes that displaced discretion from judges to prosecutors (Kramer & Ulmer, 2009; McShane, 2008; Walker, 2010; Spohn & Fornango, 2009). Upon the signing of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 into law by President Reagan, a series of harsh penalties and legislation went into effect with the purpose of increasing prison sentences and eliminating discretionary release (McShane, 2008). The newly implemented tough-on-crime mandates included three-strikes laws, truth-in-sentencing statutes and lengthy mandatory sentences, most notably for drug offenses

(Clear, 2007; Stolzenberg and D'Alessio, 1997; Zimring, 2005). Unfortunately, the strict and lengthy prison terms set by these policies—which predominately affected minority drug offenders—had little regard for the ramifications they posed for the functioning, stability and well-being of the children and families left behind.

Scholars have claimed that the media and political campaigns to sensationalize drugs as an “inner-city” problem shaped how criminal justice actors enforced the law (Beckett et al., 2005; 2005; Davis, 2005; Simon, 2009). Under the new sentencing system, discretion was shifted from judges at sentencing to prosecutors at charging and plea bargaining. This, in essence, made decision-making hidden from public scrutiny and more open to the possibility of discrimination (Albonetti, 1997; Kramer & Ulmer, 2009).

The sentencing literature overwhelmingly suggests that young, unemployed, Black and Latino males are punished more harshly than white offenders, particularly for drug crimes (Kramer & Ulmer, 2009; Provine, 2007; 2011; Spohn & Fornango, 2009; Spohn & Spears, 2000). Specifically, racial and ethnic minorities have a greater risk of prosecution whereas whites are often filtered out of the system or never reach the system at all (Alexander, 2010; Tonry, 2011; Walker, 2010). Once charged with a drug offense, Black and Latino males are the least likely to receive downward departures under federal sentencing guidelines (Spohn & Fornango, 2009), and are more likely to be sentenced to prison and to receive lengthier imprisonment terms (Kramer & Ulmer, 2009; Spohn & Spears, 2000). These realities inherent in the criminal justice system undermine family connectedness, particularly among poor, racial minorities.

Since the 1980s, the crime control policies used to wage the war on drugs have produced a sevenfold increase in the prison population (McShane, 2008; Western, 2006). Not only has the number of prisoners skyrocketed, prison terms have greatly increased as well (McShane, 2008; Lynch, 2012). Sentences for drug crimes are the leading cause of the spike in the prison population (Tonry, 2011). Despite the popularity of mandatory penalties such as three-strikes, mandatory minimum sentences, and truth-in-sentencing, there is little evidence to suggest that these approaches have any appreciable effect on crime; rather they are largely symbolic (Pratt, 2009; Simon, 2009; Walker, 2010; Zimring, 2005). What has been empirically demonstrated, however, is that when large numbers of young minorities are cycled in and out of already disadvantaged communities as a result of mass incarceration, there are profound implications for family stability, economic well-being and ultimately crime (Clear, 2007; Nurse, 2002; Pratt, 2009).

To complicate matters further, it is important to take note of the complex set of challenges that prisoners face. The majority of prisoners are poor, uneducated, racial and ethnic minority mothers and fathers who suffer from a plethora of unmet needs (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Greene, Haney & Hurtado, 2000; Murray & Farrington, 2006; 2008a; Phillips et al., 2006; Stacer; 2012; Visher, 2013; Wildeman, 2014). Substance abuse and mental health problems are rampant among the prison population. Arditti and Few (2006) refer to the conditions of addiction, mental illness and victimization suffered by a high number of female inmates as the “triple threat.” Of course, male prisoners also experience these stressors at concerning rates, but an accumulation of these risks are experienced more often by women than men. Despite the calls for policymakers to treat

these conditions as a public health concern, mass imprisonment has been employed as the chief policy response to these social problems (Arditti, 2005; Lynch, 2012).

Other research in this area—primarily focused on men—describes an additional consequence felt by prisoners: felony and parental disenfranchisement post-release (Alexander, 2010; LaVigne, Naser, Brooks & Castro, 2005; Manza & Uggen, 2006; Petersilia, 2003). For instance, in many states, individuals with a felony record are unable to vote, are disqualified from various forms of employment, are excluded from serving on juries and even restricted from obtaining a driver’s license (Manza & Uggen, 2006; Walker, 2010). Some states have also implemented policies that define incarceration as a form of parental abandonment resulting in the limitation or termination of parental rights of prisoners with children (Beckerman, 1989; Kruttschnitt, 2011; Lynch, 2012). In essence, for prisoners, completing a sentence is not the end of punishment but rather the beginning of long-lasting and even permanent disenfranchisement from American society, while struggling with various needs that are rarely addressed (Manza & Uggen, 2006).

Although a large body of work has focused on the barriers former prisoners face, an equally important line of inquiry centers on the life stressors and unmet needs of the children and caregivers left behind during maternal and paternal imprisonment (Bor, McGee & Fagan, 2004; Cho, 2009; Dallaire, 2007a; Geller et al., 2009; Geller et al., 2011; Murray and Farrington, 2005; 2006; 2008a; 2008b; Tasca et al., 2014). Studies show that children of incarcerated parents experience a myriad of negative outcomes, including mental health difficulties, substance abuse, problems in school, aggression and

delinquency (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer & Robbins, 2002; Phillips et al. 2006; Rodriguez, Smith & Zatz, 2009; Tasca et al. 2011; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011; Wildeman, 2009; 2010). Other studies have documented the financial hardships, residential mobility, and familial instability experienced by prisoners' families (Geller et al., 2011; Turanovic et al., 2012; Wildeman, 2014). Resources may be limited for non-parent caregivers (i.e. grandmothers) as the legal and institutional hurdles to receiving assistance for non-biological children are often part of a complicated and lengthy process (Kruttschnitt, 2011).

In light of the various needs of prisoners, children and caregivers, before and during incarceration, coupled with the challenges that lie ahead upon release, it becomes clear that achieving a healthy degree of family functioning and connectedness is far from an easy task (Mowen & Visher, 2013; Visher, 2013). Prisoners, their children, and remaining caregivers are in need of interventions on a variety of fronts, yet the shift away from rehabilitation toward a “lock ‘em up” approach means families are largely on their own to address these problems. Prison visitation becomes the setting by which families attempt to heal as it is the one place where the prisoner is sober and reliably available and attentive (Arditti, 2012; Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Comfort, 2008; Swanson et al., 2013). Many would contend that a prison visitation room is hardly an ideal setting to build or repair parent-child relationships, but the prevalence of incarceration among the most vulnerable, sadly, leaves few other options for these families.

As this body of work has matured over time, scholarship has begun to tackle the notion that imprisonment alone may not be the only contributor to the problems



experienced by these vulnerable children and families. Early theoretical work in this area suggested that imprisonment may *exacerbate* existing problems (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). To complicate matters further, recent research reveals that parental imprisonment may even be positive for some children and caregivers, who describe the confinement period as a reprieve from a drug-addicted and neglectful parent who was burdensome to the family (Giordano, 2010; Turanovic et al., 2012). As such, it is important for research on the status of families during imprisonment and on child well-being to consider life circumstances and stressors that occur *before* a parent's incarceration, and the reasons for those changes (Johnston, 2006; Phillips et al., 2006; Turanovic et al., 2012).

When parents suffer from addiction, lack an education, and reside in impoverished communities, remaining connected during incarceration and achieving positive child outcomes may be difficult. Although mothers are usually the primary caregivers for their children, a national survey of prisoners found that only 64 percent of mothers were living with their children in the month prior to their arrest (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), meaning that one-third of the children experienced maternal absence *prior* to their mother's incarceration. Prior research has rarely examined the extent of parental involvement and stressors in the lives of families prior to parental incarceration, even though these hardships may be common and part of larger structural problems faced by vulnerable families most affected by crime and imprisonment in America.

The heavy reliance on imprisonment as part of the “get tough” movement was intended to target its wrath on offenders alone—particularly drug offenders—but ended up reaching children and families in unintentional yet consequential ways (Lenox, 2011;

Lynch, 2012; Provine, 2011). Research has made great strides in understanding the complexity of imprisonment in the lives of children and families. Indeed, studies have demonstrated that incarceration may not always *cause* adverse child and family outcomes, but rather increase their likelihood by aggravating hardships already present in these families' lives.

Despite these important advancements, we still know relatively little about familial ties (i.e. children, caregivers, prisoners) *during* maternal and paternal imprisonment and what such ties mean for children (Swanson et al., 2013; Turney, 2014). As will be discussed in the following section, maintaining connections to prisoners is an arduous undertaking. Yet, some children and caregivers do it and others do not. Why this is the case remains an open question and what this means for child well-being is not well understood. Tapping into these questions is an important extension to the study of mass imprisonment policies as these questions speak to the stability of family systems and the well-being of the most vulnerable among us.

### **Parallels between Prison Visitation and the Tough on Crime Movement**

The tough-on-crime movement has extended beyond law enforcement and the courts to the policies and practices inside correctional institutions. One way to map out how prison visitation policies have become increasingly punitive is to examine the decisions handed down by the courts over time (Beckerman, 1989; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). Prior to the 1960s, the courts maintained the position that while imprisonment resulted in the loss of certain liberties and rights, courts should not interfere in matters of prison rules and regulations concerning visitation. In essence, the

courts initially upheld a “hands off” policy when it came to prison visits (*Coffin v. Reichard*, 1945; *Price v. Johnston*, 1948). The justification for this approach was the belief that courts lacked expertise in penology, and that judicial interference might undermine prison order (*Golub v. Krimsky*, 1960). This hands-off stance, however, began to falter as the courts later acknowledged that some deprivations were a consequence of “capricious and arbitrary decisions” (*Jackson v. Godwin*, 1968). The courts later held that state inmates were protected under the federal Civil Rights Act, and that the federal courts could consider prisoners’ claims of constitutional rights violations (*Cooper v. Pate*, 1964). The courts subsequently ruled that prisoners have a constitutional right to visitation which cannot be restricted as a form of punishment (*Agron v. Montanyne*, 1975; *Cooper v. Morin*, 1979). Together, these early rulings suggest a high regard for the protection of prisoner rights in which prison visitation is an integral part. This would change beginning in the 1980s, however, as philosophies surrounding incarceration began to harden.

Prison administrators began to feel pressure to alter existing correctional policies—including visitation—that were viewed as “being soft on crime or as rewarding inmates for their law violations” (Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005, p. 293). For instance, the public perceived prisoners’ receipt of educational and recreational programs, access to free medical services, and even the opportunity to visit with family members as “luxuries” that inmates did not deserve (Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). Correctional personnel were faced with a dilemma. On one hand, prison administrators were very much aware of public demands for “no frills” prison policies. At the same time, however,

they also knew that programming and visitation opportunities had positive impacts on institutional order (Casey-Acevedo, Bakken & Karle, 2004; Cochran, 2012; Duwe & Clark, 2013; Jiang & Winfree, 2006). Given mounting public pressure, correctional institutions began to implement a series of policy changes. For instance, prisoner programming opportunities were dramatically reduced and institutional “perks” such as weights, college courses, and commissary items were frequently eliminated (Toch, 2001; 2007).

In addition to changes to prisoner-specific policies, visitation rules and practices also began to mirror the broader punitive philosophy surrounding incarceration. Specifically, prisons began to curb the “quality” of visits by instituting rules against hugging, kissing and other interpersonal contact between prisoners, their children and other family members. Moreover, prisons implemented stricter regulations related to visitor dress code, visiting times and the availability of child-friendly items and activities in visiting rooms (e.g., games, books) (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Christian, 2005; Day et al., 2005; Swanson et al., 2013).

Other policies included cost-prohibitive phone charges, often more than \$1 per minute and increases in nonlocal incarceration (Arditti, 2012; Travis, 2005). It is common for prisoners to be housed hundreds of miles from their homes, children, and families who often have limited transportation options (Poehlmann et al., 2010). This is especially true during maternal incarceration, as there are fewer women’s prisons than men’s. As such, family members of female inmates must often commute longer distances than those of their male counterparts (Fuller, 1993; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007). Nurse

(2002) claims that strict correctional policies have been crafted to produce “deep breaks” from children, partners and families as a means to toughen the community response to crime.

What is more, correctional facilities began to rely on “non-contact” visitation more often as a disciplinary tool or for prisoners classified as “high institutional risk” (i.e., prison gang members) (Toch, 2001; 2007). The issue of restricted visitation through “non-contact” visits was raised in the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court case *Overton v. Bazzetta*. Unlike in earlier decisions, the Court took a hardening stance on prison contact by ruling that contact visits can be restricted under certain circumstances. The Court concluded that “visitation alternatives need not be ideal, only available” (*Overton v. Bazzetta*, 2003).

More recently, several states have considered charging family members fees to visit their incarcerated loved ones. In 2011, the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC) enacted such a policy, which requires all approved visitors to pay a one-time fee of \$25 in order to visit a prisoner. ADC personnel maintain that this policy lessens the financial burden on taxpayers for rising prison costs. Specifically, prison officials state that this fee will be used to cover background checks of visitor applicants, prison maintenance and repairs, and that such a policy ensures prison “safety” (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2011). Critics of this policy contend that this is an unfair and particularly harsh tax placed on already financially strapped families attempting to maintain familial connections to prisoners. Considered together, these increasingly punitive correctional policies raise serious concerns for the ways in which the mass

imprisonment era impacts families—particularly children—in maintaining a meaningful connection to an imprisoned mother or father.

### **The “Gatekeepers”: The Power of Caregiver Type**

Despite the high level of scholarly and policy attention paid to the consequences of incarceration for prisoners, children and families, limited empirical inquiry has been undertaken on the in-prison connections between children and their incarcerated mothers and fathers (Branch & Brinson, 2007; Turney, 2014). This is surprising when considering that nearly half of all imprisoned parents do not receive visits from their children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Young and Smith (2000) maintain that since correctional policies have adopted a “just desserts” approach in dealing with offenders, the impact of these constraints on families’ abilities to remain connected must be recognized. Still, even with the various structural and institutional-level barriers that make prison visitation difficult for children to visit their incarcerated mother or father, some children do visit. What factors account for this? I argue that caregiver type is the key predictor of whether or not children visit their imprisoned parent.

In their research with male prisoners and their romantic partners, Day and colleagues (2005) documented the complexities inherent in prisoner relationships. They found that prisoners would express contradictory feelings toward their partners, feelings that the authors describe as ambivalence. For instance, prisoners stated that they both “loved *and* hated” their partners (Day et al., 2005). Other studies reveal a similar theme of ambivalence regarding family members’ rationale for visiting in light of the various challenges inherent in the process. Specifically, Christian (2005) found that many family

members expressed an attitude of “I don’t like it, but I do it anyway” when discussing visitation with male prisoners. Likewise, in her study of jail visitation among women inmates, Arditti (2003) discovered that more than half of the visitors in her sample admitted that they often did not want to go to the jail, yet the majority of participants were visiting regularly. And, Fuller’s (1993) study of visitors in a women’s correctional facility in California found that while half of the sample described numerous obstacles in visiting their loved one, visiting was such a priority for this group that they were willing to make the necessary sacrifices in order to do so.

Although family members acknowledge the financial, physical and emotional challenges in visiting inmates, for some families, the will to remain connected trumps all else (Swanson et al., 2013). Still, these studies shed little light on parent-child visitation, and they do not include participants with a family member in prison who do not visit. In addition, prior studies do not consistently capture measures of barriers to visitation or prior life stressors that can influence whether or not a family member visits (e.g., distance, economic status, addiction). While prior work does illustrate the complexities surrounding prison visitation, there remains a void in the literature regarding why only some children visit their imprisoned mothers and fathers.

The majority of children of prisoners express a desire to visit their incarcerated parent, yet children cannot visit alone (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Hence, the gatekeeper maintains power over whether or not a child visits his or her mother or father in prison (Murray, Farrington & Sekol, 2012; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). The dynamics of caregiver gatekeeping by members of prisoners’ kinship networks during imprisonment

are poorly understood, despite their critical importance (Cecil et al., 2008; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). According to Roy and Dyson (2005), caregiver gatekeeping is more than caregivers' values or beliefs about parental involvement. It is an "active process of negotiating overlapping role expectations as partners and parents" (p.305). The authors contend that the process of gatekeeping over negotiated roles requires an active response from the parent. Given the parent's incarcerated status, prison visitation serves as a means to obtain such an active response (Roy & Dyson, 2005).

In essence, caregivers are in a pivotal position to facilitate a connection between prisoner and child, or prohibit it. In turn, the children are reliant on the caregiver to nurture or impede that relationship (Swanson et al., 2013; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). In some situations, restricting parent-child contact all together may be a wise choice if the child is in need of protection from harmful behavior exhibited by the parent prior to imprisonment (Giordano, 2010; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Even in these cases, however, the decision of caregivers to cut off contact between child and prisoner may not be so straightforward. For instance, some caregivers view incarceration as a period to rebuild relationships between children and prisoners that were tainted by pre-incarceration hardships. In these cases, caregivers provide an opportunity for the prisoner to make things "right" with the child (Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Day et al., 2005; Einat et al., 2013; Nurse, 2002). Although all types of caregivers have been reported to value prison contact among children and parents, the complex nature of mother and grandparent caregiver relationships with the child's incarcerated parent make these



caregivers the most likely to facilitate parent-child prison contact—net of prior stressors and institutional barriers (Day et al., 2005; Fuller, 1993).

Given that differences exist in the facilitation of parent-child visitation depending upon the gender of the incarcerated parent, I differentiate between maternal and paternal incarceration in the next sections.

**Maternal incarceration.** When mothers go to prison, the majority of children are cared for by grandmothers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Yet, it is important to illustrate that while the majority of mothers were the sole caregivers of children prior to incarceration, many grandparents assumed the role as caregiver well before any period of maternal confinement. According to the latest Bureau of Justice Statistics estimate, nearly one-third of children were not living with their mothers prior to her incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Given the high prevalence of substance abuse, mental illness and victimization histories of incarcerated women—referred to as the “triple threat”—many of these women were unable to care for their children before any criminal justice system involvement (Arditti & Few, 2006; Owen, 1998).

As discussed earlier, grandmothers have often been the consistent caretakers of their grandchildren throughout their lives. In particular, research on African American women and their families indicates that multi-generational extended family systems are quite common in child-rearing (Cecil et al., 2008; Hanlon, Carswell & Rose, 2007). The assumption of caregiving responsibilities by grandmothers in difficult times is a necessary aspect of the kinship care experience exhibited by black families that is best represented by the phrase, “it takes a village to raise a child” (Hanlon et al., 2007). This

phenomenon reflects the reliance on extended kinship networks—particularly grandmothers—among poor, disadvantaged parents who are the most often targets of mass imprisonment policies (Hanlon et al., 2007; Stacer, 2012).

Despite their consistent involvement in children’s lives, grandmothers are unique in their vested interest in mother-child relationships. As such, they are expected to be the most likely facilitators of mother-child prison visitation. The dedication of grandparents to bring children to visit their incarcerated mothers—who are most often their own daughters—is demonstrated by Fuller’s (1993) study. Although obstacles were cited by 48 percent of the sample, visiting was such a priority that sacrifices were consistently made by this group of mostly grandparents. In fact, 82 percent of these visitors reported regular monthly visits (Fuller, 1993). The reasons underlying this dedication to mother-child prison visitation are rooted in their power as gatekeepers and in their “idealized expectations” of their daughters as mothers (Arditti, 2012; Day et al., 2005; Nurse, 2002).

Grandmothers want their role as caregiver to be temporary, as these grandparents are rarely well-situated and are typically overwhelmed (Hanlon et al., 2007; Turanovic et al., 2012). The majority of grandparent caregivers are, on average, in their fifties, unmarried minority women caring for their daughters’ children. While often employed, they tend to work at low-wage jobs and are recipients of some form of public assistance (Denby, 2012). Understandably, these aging and overly stressed grandmothers maintain a heavy burden in caring for their grandchildren financially, physically and emotionally (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza, 2001; Turanovic et al., 2012). Research by Mackintosh and colleagues (2006) revealed that nearly one-third of

grandmother caregivers had stress levels in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of national norms.

Grandmothers want their grandchildren to have a relationship with their mother and believe that the incarceration term serves as a period for their daughters to reflect upon the past and restart their lives as mothers to their children. Scholars have described this phenomenon as “idealized expectations” (Day et al., 2005) in that these caregivers hold futuristic views of these prisoners as fitting the mold of the stereotypical, socially acceptable mother even though such grandiose expectations are unlikely to be met (Arditti, 2012; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Nurse, 2002). When mothers are in prison, the grandmother—as the gatekeeper between mother and child—is in the powerful position to lay out her expectations of the prisoner as a mother and daughter.

Incarcerated women often have strained relationships with their children’s caregivers, as grandmothers frequently have unresolved issues with the imprisoned mothers due to their inconsistent parenting, substance abuse, mental health issues and prior criminal justice involvement (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Cecil et al, 2008; Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Turanovic et al., 2012). The incarceration may be the only time that the mother is sober, available and attentive. These grandmothers, who are stressed by their added burdens, may express hostility toward the prisoner as the prison provides a safe environment to do so (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Cecil et al., 2008). Brown and Bloom (2009) showed how grandparents, understandably frustrated over their situations, would use prison visits as a means to berate the women over their children’s problems and the burdens of caregiving. Indeed, the unleashing of anger at incarcerated mothers by these caregivers was found to be a typical experience during maternal imprisonment and

reinforced the burden these caregivers endured. At the same time, grandmothers have a vested interest in resolving differences between themselves and the prisoner in hopes of paving the way for maternal parental involvement post-release. These “idealized expectations” could be a driving force behind grandmothers’ greater willingness to facilitate visits between children and their imprisoned mothers than other types of caregivers, and net of economic and institutional barriers.

The desire for their caregiving responsibilities to be temporary is further illustrated by research that shows that a large portion of grandmothers are reluctant to assume legal guardianship of their grandchildren, despite their length of time in this role and the additional financial assistance that could be obtained by doing so (Denby, 2012; Hanlon et al., 2007). Grandmothers often hold guilt over their daughters’ imprisonment as they may feel to blame for the problems that led up to their criminal justice system involvement (Hanlon et al., 2007). Accordingly, grandmothers often oppose legal custody or guardianship because doing so might be viewed as “an indictment against the mother and a proclamation of her parental unfitness and that this would be damaging and disruptive to family relationships” (Denby, 2012, p. 123). Moreover, undergoing the legal process of guardianship and custody is an expensive, time-consuming and emotionally exhaustive endeavor that many grandmothers are unwilling to take on. Although the financial resources that would be made available in obtaining formal guardianship (e.g., public assistance receipt for the children) may be desperately needed, the potential costs to family relationships are often viewed as too high by these caregivers (Hanlon et al., 2007). Other studies show how grandparents are motivated by keeping the

family together and that despite the substantial financial burdens in visiting, maintaining or rebuilding mother-child relationships are highly valued by this group of caretakers (Fuller, 1993; Gleeson, Wesley, Ellis, Seryak, Talley & Robinson, 2009; Gleeson & Seryak, 2010).

Of course, some children of incarcerated mothers are cared for by caregivers other than grandmothers. According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics report, nearly one-third of children with a mother in prison reside with their father and approximately 12 percent are in foster placements (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). As supported by prior research, it is argued here that children with caregivers other than grandparents are less likely to visit their incarcerated mothers in prison. For instance, visitors of women prisoners who bring children to visit are rarely fathers. In fact, Fuller (1993) found that nearly all child visitors were brought by their grandmothers, whereas only 11 percent of children were brought by fathers. When women prisoners were found to receive visits from men, most were “friends” and had no contact, relation or involvement with the children (Fuller, 1993). The notion that fathers are unlikely to facilitate prison contact during maternal imprisonment is not surprising considering that a large portion of incarcerated mothers report having a poor or non-existent relationship with the father of their children (Arditti & Few, 2006). Gilham (2012) documents that prior to fathers’ being willing to bring a child to visit an incarcerated mother, these women needed to prove that they were ready to be a “fit” parent.

The lack of involvement among father caregivers in the facilitation of mother-child prison visitation may partly stem from these women’s violation of the “good

mother” role. As Arditti (2012) explains, societal assumptions surrounding mothering depict women as self-sacrificing, benevolent and pure. Fitting the persona of the “crack mom” is in direct violation of the “good mother” role that women are required to play. These stereotypes of motherhood—often linked to race and class—permeate all levels of American society (Zatz, 2000). At the macro level, the failure of women to live up to their role as “good mothers” may account for the spikes in female imprisonment rates given attributions of blameworthiness assigned to women offenders (Zatz, 2000). At the individual level, courts and legislatures have assumed incarcerated mothers to be unfit parents, who can be considered to have abandoned their children (Lenox, 2011).

Kruttschnitt (2011) describes how the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) requires states to initiate the termination of parental rights of parents whose children are in foster care for at least 15 months of the preceding two years. Since children of prisoners in foster placements tend to have an incarcerated mother, this law has significantly restricted the number of foster children who can visit their mother in prison (Beckerman, 1989; Kruttschnitt, 2011). Thus, ideologies pertaining to “good mothering” may be an explanation for the lower probability of mother-child prison visitation facilitated by non-grandparent caregivers. Grandmothers are not immune from such societal values; yet, they have a vested interest in maintaining mother-child connections via prison visitation given their own set of needs and the fact that these mothers are, after all, most often their daughters.

To reiterate, given grandmothers’ desire for their caregiving role to be temporary and their hope that their daughters will assume their parenting responsibilities upon

release, these caregivers use their power as gatekeepers to initiate mother-child visitation and demand that their expectations of these mothers be met in the future (Gleeson & Seryak, 2010; Hanlon et al., 2007). Although their expectations are undoubtedly “idealized” in light of these women’s histories and in the absence of treatment, prison visitation serves as the only viable option these grandmothers have in keeping the family together—which is a vital need for these tapped caregivers.

**Paternal incarceration.** The majority of children remain in the care of their mothers during paternal incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). In light of this, a large body of work has emerged that suggests that when a father is incarcerated, remaining single mothers and their children are faced with substantial hardships as a result of the father’s absence (Geller et al., 2009; Geller et al., 2011; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011; Schwartz-Soicher, Geller & Garfinkel, 2011; Turney & Wildeman, 2013; Wildeman, 2014). These studies make implicit assumptions that these men were the financial providers for the family and the loss of his support can lead to economic and residential instability for the family (Geller et al., 2011; Schwartz-Soicher et al. 2011; Wildeman, 2014).

Other research, however, paints a much more nuanced and complicated picture of the status of vulnerable families who experience paternal imprisonment (Arditti, 2012; Day et al., 2005; Roy & Dyson, 2005; Turanovic et al., 2012). In disadvantaged communities where incarceration is commonplace, men who are available and consistently present fathers are a rarity (Clear, 2007; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Roy & Burton, 2007). Yet, the women in these communities maintain expectations that their

children's fathers will assume traditional fathering roles (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Roy & Dyson, 2005). Unfortunately, such expectations often go unmet as many of these men fail to meet the fathering demands placed upon them by their children's mothers. Prior to incarceration, these fathers often have limited involvement with their children. Many fathers financially contribute to their children by purchasing diapers and toys, but their assistance is largely informal and sporadic (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Roy & Burton, 2007; Roy & Dyson, 2005). Moreover, many of these fathers have children with multiple women, which further complicate their involvement and relationships with their children and their children's mothers (Day et al., 2005; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Roy & Dyson, 2005).

A plethora of studies have documented the breakdown of families in inner cities in America and how the rise of mass imprisonment has led to the absence of men as stable partners and fathers (Clear, 2007; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Travis, 2005; Travis & Waul, 2003; Western & Muller, 2013). This becomes glaringly evident in research that examines the relationships between incarcerated fathers, their children and their mother caregivers, and has important implications for prison visitation between these men and their children. Once a father is incarcerated, however, the power dynamics between the child's mother and father shift (Roy & Dyson, 2005; Swanson et al., 2013). Men desire relationships with their children and at the same time desire financial assistance from these women while in prison (Arditti, 2012; Comfort, 2008; Jiang & Winfree, 2006). This places the children's mothers in the position of gatekeeper in which she has the power to negotiate her demands (Swanson et al., 2013). In exchange for economic and social



support while in prison, these women can initiate a relationship between their children and their children's father through visitation while laying out expectations for fatherhood post-release (Cecil et al., 2008; Comfort, 2008; Day et al., 2005; Roy & Dyson, 2005). Although the majority of studies of maternal gatekeeping center on divorce and shared child custody arrangements, Roy and Dyson (2005) found that during paternal incarceration, mothers can exercise control to open the door for paternal involvement through prison visitation.

Arditti (2012) describes how mothers, in their role as gatekeepers, may shape men's fathering identities and ultimately their involvement with their children. In their study of incarcerated fathers, Day and colleagues (2005) found that the majority of these men viewed themselves as good fathers and also as fairly involved in the lives of their children, despite their imprisonment. And, in interviews with children during paternal incarceration, Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) described how children looked forward to their visits as they missed their father, even though many never had a relationship with him prior to imprisonment. These findings are inconsistent with the notion of "traditional" parenting relationships. Instead, this research highlights the deterioration of family systems among those who experience mass incarceration, in which the prison period itself provides the opportunity for fathering during prison visitation with children.

A key dimension of gatekeeping is expectations of change (Edin & Nelson, 2013). Much like with grandmother caregivers during maternal imprisonment, mother caregivers also often hold "idealized expectations" of these men as fathers, and/or as partners during incarceration (Day et al., 2005). Taking children to visit their incarcerated fathers

provides these women an opportunity to create a sense of ‘family’ and ‘home,’ thereby reinforcing these “idealized expectations” (Comfort, 2008; Day et al., 2005; Roy & Dyson, 2005). Moreover, many of these women maintain a belief that imprisonment will address these men’s needs related to unemployment, addiction, violence and parenting (Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Comfort, 2008; Einat et al., 2013; Mowen & Visher, 2013). Prior work reveals how both incarcerated fathers and their children’s mothers develop a sense of empathy with each others’ challenges during confinement and that this empathy was also vital to the facilitation of prison visitation with the children (Einat et al., 2013; Roy & Dyson, 2005).

In her work on visitation between incarcerated men and their romantic partners, Comfort (2008) describes how many women have been repeatedly disappointed by these men on the outside, but during incarceration, they can be relied upon to be available and attentive partners and fathers. In exchange, these women provide monetary and social support to these prisoners. Research has shown that incarcerated men receive the majority of their financial support in prison from partners (Jiang & Winfree, 2006). Women frequently attempt to minimize the hardships associated with prison life for these men by sending food and hygiene packages and money orders on a routine basis in addition to regularly visiting (Comfort, 2008). In turn, these mothers end up sustaining the prisoner’s upkeep rather than vice versa (Hairston, 2003).

In an effort to establish paternal involvement and create a sense of family, many of these women endure great hardships. For instance, Harman and colleagues (2007) found that whereas some women expressed satisfaction with the new parenting

arrangement, the majority of mothers experienced alarmingly high levels of stress due to financial struggles. In addition to economic difficulties, many mother caregivers experience parenting strain, conflicts between work and family responsibilities and concerns over the well-being of their children (Arditti, 2003; Arditti et al., 2005).

Although the vast majority of children of incarcerated fathers are in the care of their mothers, some children reside with other caregivers (e.g., grandparents, other relatives, foster placement) (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). It is posited here that children in these other care arrangements are less likely to visit their incarcerated fathers as these caregivers have less of a vested interest than mothers, or are simply unable to do so (as in the case of foster placement). For children in the care of a non-parent caregiver, it can be argued that efforts to facilitate parental involvement will be focused first on the mother as opposed to the father in light of the “good mother” roles that women are expected to play (Arditti, 2012; Zatz, 2000).

As discussed previously, enduring the financial and physical costs of prison visitation with fathers is not likely to be a primary concern for caregivers attempting to get mothers to assume her mothering duties. The same case can be made for children of incarcerated fathers in the foster care system. Child welfare systems are largely women-oriented such that the responsibility of parenting falls on the shoulders of the mothers (Lenox, 2011; Kruttschnitt, 2011; Swann & Sylvester, 2006). Given the high prevalence of non-involved fathers in the lives of children, father-child prison visiting is unlikely a priority for non-mother caregivers.

In short, these theoretical explanations provide the backdrop as to why children with mother caregivers are expected to be the most likely to visit a father in prison in spite of the obstacles posed by the visitation process itself. When these fathers are incarcerated, mothers gain power to make demands of the prisoner as partners and fathers through their gatekeeping role (Day et al., 2005; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Roy & Dyson, 2005; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). In exchange for monetary and social support while incarcerated, these fathers are able to nurture a relationship with their children through prison visitation—often for the first time (Roy & Dyson, 2005). Mothers are able to secure a sense of family during these visits, which reinforces often unrealistic expectations of these men as fathers (Arditti, 2012; Comfort, 2008). In light of family instability among those impacted by incarceration, father-child prison visitation is one way in which families can attempt to remain intact.

In summary, although a number of studies exist on the relationship dynamics between prisoners and their adult visitors, there is a scarcity of empirical knowledge on the influence of caregiver type on child contact (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Day et al., 2005; Turney, 2014). Prior research has documented the complex relationships between mothers and incarcerated men, and grandparents and incarcerated women; this research also has demonstrated that although they are overwhelmed and frustrated, these caregivers have their own needs and expectations to meet through prison visitation (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Day et al., 2005; Roy & Dyson, 2005). Unlike mothers and grandmothers, other family members and friends are not as entrenched with the prisoner, and therefore, may be less willing to make the sacrifices associated with facilitating

prison contact for children. This, however, is merely speculative given that no research has empirically examined this relationship specific to child visitation and, hence, is the focus of the present study.

### **How Do They Fare? Prison Visitation and Child Responses**

In addition to examining the effect of caregiver type on whether or not parent-child visitation occurs, this dissertation explores how children who visit their incarcerated parent fare behaviorally and emotionally. Christian and colleagues (2006) explain that there is an assumption underlying much of the literature that prison visitation is in the best interests of prisoners and their families. For instance, a sizeable body of work indicates that prisoners who receive visits engage in lower levels of prison misconduct, as visitation is seen as an incentive for good behavior (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Cochran, 2012; Schaefer, 1994; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005; Wooldredge, 1999). Prison visitation has also been linked to reduced levels of recidivism (Bales & Mears, 2008; Duwe & Clark, 2013). Specifically, Bales and Mears (2008) found that among prisoners who were visited, their odds of recidivism were 31% lower than the odds for their counterparts who did not receive visits.

Prison visitation has been associated with improved psychological well-being of prisoners and a greater likelihood of familial reunification upon release (Arditti & Few, 2008; Hairston, 1991; 2003; Roxburgh & Fitch, 2013; Stacer, 2012; Visher, LaVigne & Travis, 2004; Visher & Travis, 2003). Although the examination of the effects of prison visitation on inmate outcomes is indeed important, there is a scarcity of studies that assess the impact of prison visitation on child well-being. In light of unprecedented rates

of imprisonment, understanding visitation's effects on children becomes vital for research and policy purposes.

Parent-child separation as a result of imprisonment may generate emotional and behavioral problems for children because the imprisonment is often unanticipated, disruptive and unexplained (Poehlmann, 2005b). Prison contact may alleviate or exacerbate these problems. The study of prison visitation and child well-being, however, is undoubtedly complex. As Arditti (2003) points out, visitation can have a “double edge” for children in that it can ease any negative feelings associated with parental separation by providing a context for familial connections, while at the same time posing its own set of traumas given that the prison environment itself can be a fear-filled experience. In her later work, Arditti (2012) termed this contradictory experience for children “the visitation paradox,” noting that prison visitation may be seen as a key facilitator in positive child adjustment but it may also contribute to adverse child responses. In short, prison visitation may be both beneficial and harmful for children—hence, the “paradox.”

Two theoretical frameworks underlie the visitation paradox. First, attachment theory, which is rooted in the disciplines of sociology and psychology, emphasize that the loss of someone significant in our lives can generate negative responses (Harvey, 2002). According to Boss (2004), “ambiguous loss results from situations of not knowing if a person is dead or alive, absent or present” (p. 237). The loss of a parent to imprisonment can be considered an ambiguous loss in that children experience the absence of a parent in both a physical and psychological sense (Arditti, 2012).

Specifically, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980) has been used to explain why parental imprisonment may cause adverse outcomes for children of incarcerated parents in that disrupted primary attachments can be particularly stressful for children. From an attachment perspective, prison visitation might be associated with improved child well-being in that children are able to maintain or repair disrupted parental attachments. Furthermore, children can see firsthand that their parent is safe as the absence of a parent can lead a child to fear that something terrible has happened to him or her (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002).

Alternatively, the second theoretical perspective that contributes to the visitation paradox for children is that of “secondary prisonization.” Grounded in the early work of Clemmer (1958) and Sykes (1958) on prisonization and the pains of imprisonment, Comfort (2008) describes how visitation is the context by which prisons alter families’ lives personally, domestically and socially. Strict visiting policies and the obstacles associated with visiting a prisoner can make family members feel like “quasi-inmates” in which visitors are thereby transformed by their contact with the institution. Visitors can be made to feel like intruders who are to be controlled through degradation and intimidation (Comfort, 2008; Hairston, 1998). Given these institutional conditions, prison visitation may eliminate any potential benefits of parent-child contact and could, in fact, spark destructive child responses (Arditti, 2005).

The ways in which children’s behaviors relate to contact with the incarcerated parent constitute an important but understudied process in the parental incarceration literature. Prior work on coping responses among children during maternal and paternal

incarceration is limited, particularly in terms of understanding how prison visitation influences the emotional and behavioral well-being of prisoners' children. Among the studies that do exist, findings are mixed.

For instance, Dallaire and Wilson (2010) found that children of incarcerated parents reported more attention problems when they visited more often with the parent. At the same time, however, children also reported fewer anxious/depressed and somatic complaints after contact with the prisoner. Shlafer and Poehlmann et al. (2010) found no statistically significant association between children's contact with incarcerated parents and caregiver- and teacher-reported behavior problems. Although some research focusing specifically on visits documented positive child outcomes when such contact occurred as part of an intervention (Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998), other studies found negative outcomes when visits occurred in the absence of intervention (e.g., Dallaire et al., 2009; Poehlmann, 2005b).

The inconsistent findings across existing studies appear in line with Arditti's (2012) concept of the visitation paradox in that children may benefit in some ways and be harmed in others in visiting an imprisoned parent. In the following section, I provide a detailed discussion of existing research that is rooted in these two competing theoretical frameworks, highlight the limitations associated with prior work, and explain how the current study attempts to fill these voids. In conducting my investigation qualitatively, I am better able to tap into the nuances associated with prison visitation and child well-being.



**Benefits of prison visitation: Attachment.** It is often maintained that parental incarceration is harmful for children due to parent-child separation (Bowlby, 1973; Deck, 1988; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Myers et al. 1999; Poehlmann, 2005b). According to attachment theory, if a child does not have sufficient contact with an attachment figure, the child may experience emotional and developmental difficulties, hostility and withdrawal, and an inability to maintain long-term interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980; Deck, 1988; Poehlmann, 2005b; Poehlmann et al. 2010). This perspective focuses on parent-child interactions that contribute to children's close relationships and well-being across the life span (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980). Attachment theory emphasizes the significance of disruptions in relationships that occur when a child is separated from a parent, such as when a parent is incarcerated (Poehlmann, 2005b). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, nearly a quarter of children with parents in state prison were four years of age or younger (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). These statistics suggest that many children experience parental separation due to imprisonment while in the process of forming primary attachments (Poehlmann et al., 2010).

Johnston and Gabel (1995) posit that parental incarceration is a traumatic form of separation that takes a toll on child well-being in several key ways. First, they contend that children experience typical emotions as a result of the loss of their parent, including grief, anger, and anxiety. Second, given the loss of a parent, these children often resent rules set by their caregivers and begin to experience problems such as aggression, poor grades, and sleeping and eating problems, as well as engage in delinquency and drug use

(Cooksey, Menaghan & Jekielek, 1997; Parcel & Menaghan, 1993; Travis, 2005; Wildeman, 2009). Parental imprisonment is often considered to be a unique and particularly distressing form of separation as it can result in ambiguity for children in multiple dimensions of their lives (Murray & Farrington, 2008a; Poehlmann, 2005a).

Not surprisingly, parent-child separation due to parental incarceration has been linked to a multitude of adverse child outcomes (Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Murray & Farrington, 2006; 2008b; Owen, 1998; Phillips et al., 2006; Sharp and Marcus-Mendoza, 2001). Consistent with this perspective, studies have found that children of prisoners often experience grief, nightmares, anger, and emotional distress as well as depression, anxiety and other mental health problems (Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Dallaire, 2007a; Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Phillips et al., 2002; Seidler & Sack, 1978; Tasca et al., 2014). Previous studies demonstrate that boys who experience paternal incarceration are more likely to exhibit sadness, withdrawn and clingy behavior, and internalizing problems than those who do not (Murray & Farrington, 2008a), and that adolescents of incarcerated parents have significantly higher rates of conduct disorder and attention-deficit/hyperactivity problems (Phillips et al., 2002). Children of women inmates have also been found to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and feelings of anger, guilt and long-term trauma due to the separation resulting from parental imprisonment (Kampfner, 1995).

When considering that incarceration can be disruptive to parent-child bonds that are critical to children's emotional and behavioral well-being, prison visitation provides an opportunity to repair and maintain attachments to parents, which may limit negative

behaviors among this vulnerable group (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Poehlmann et al., 2010). Murray and Farrington (2006) contend that when children are able to maintain contact with their imprisoned parent, coupled with stable living arrangements, the negative effects of parent-child separation can be reduced. Though visits in prison can evoke distress and expressions of insecurity (Dallaire, 2007a; Poehlmann, 2005b), absence of any contact with parents may be problematic and associated with feelings of alienation (Celinska & Siegel, 2010; Schlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). In other words, prison visitation may provide these children a coping resource to deal with the loss of a parent. From an attachment perspective, then, children who visit an imprisoned parent should fare well.

Evaluations of programs that promote prison visitation between prisoners and their children demonstrate the benefits associated with visiting an incarcerated parent for children. For example, in one examination of a parenting intervention for 16 incarcerated fathers, Landreth and Lobaugh (1998) found that children's self-esteem increased across a 10-week intervention. A key dimension of this intervention was a weekly parent-child visit in which the fathers could interact and have physical contact with their children in a child-friendly environment. A study examining the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars intervention, which includes an enhanced visitation component, found that nearly all caregivers interviewed reported some decrease in girls' problem behaviors following the intervention (Block & Potthast, 1998).

In addition, a lack of visitation with an incarcerated parent has been associated with children's negative feelings about their incarcerated parents. For example, in a study

of children who participated in a mentoring program for children of incarcerated parents, Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) found that experiencing no contact with an incarcerated parent was associated with children's feelings of alienation from the parent. Mignon and Ransford (2012) explain that maintaining an emotional bond through visitation can provide a sense of protection and security for child and prisoner alike. Other studies suggest that children have been found to look forward to their visits with their incarcerated mother or father (Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Seidler & Sack, 1978), and that prison visitation may reduce negative child behaviors and improve the quality of parent-child relationships (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Seidler & Sack, 1978).

Research reveals that parent-child visitation can help children verbalize emotions regarding their parent's absence (Poehlmann et al., 2010; Seidler & Sack, 1978), which may help children cope with their loss. In addition, Trice and Brewster (2004) found that children who maintained frequent contact with their incarcerated mothers were less likely to experience school suspension, truancy and school drop-out. Interestingly, in a separate study on 54 women on parole, Dodge and Pogrebin (2001) found that nearly half of these women did not maintain contact with their families during confinement and these women attributed the lack of in-prison contact as a factor in their children's behavioral and emotional difficulties. Visits allow children to express their emotional reactions regarding separation from their parent and to see their parent's situation realistically, thus relieving fears about their parent's safety and treatment which can be important for child well-being (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Johnston, 1995; LaVigne et al., 2005; Mignon & Ransford, 2012; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008).

**Harms of prison visitation: Secondary prisonization.** Research documenting the harsh conditions of confinement was originally centered on inmate-only outcomes (Clemmer, 1958; Sykes, 1958). Comfort (2008) extended this line of inquiry to include the way in which visitors' are shaped by encounters with the institution through visitation. A key finding in her work pertains to the transformation of visitors' into "quasi-inmates" as family members are "subjected to weakened versions of the elaborate regulations, concentrated surveillance, and corporeal confinement governing the lives of ensnared felons and thus are secondarily prisonized by their interactions with the penal institution" (p. 29).

Comfort (2008) describes the uncertainty surrounding visitation in her work. For instance, there are no timeframes given to visitors for wait times (which can last several hours) and forewarning is rarely given about amendments made to existing rules regarding approved personal items or attire. The slightest misstep in documentation, clothing, or behavior can result in a delay or even termination of the visit. Considering that family members often commute far distances with minimal financial resources, such hitches can be highly burdensome (Christian, 2005; Petersilia, 2003; Swanson et al., 2013).

Overall, Comfort's (2008) work highlights how the visiting experience can be overwhelming for adults, but what about children? Although her study did not center on children, she documented the commonality of mothers having to hush and console their tired, crying children while in an overcrowded waiting area surrounded by electric fences, metal doors and locked gates. Given her thick descriptions of the daunting prison

environment, it becomes clear how children might be negatively affected by navigating a penal institution for visiting purposes.

Prison visitation has been linked to negative outcomes in children (Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Poehlmann, 2005a; Poehlmann et al., 2010). Caregivers, caseworkers, and prisoners themselves sometimes resist visitation by children, citing undesirable reactions by children (Myers et al., 1999). In a survey of visitors with children visiting California prisons, about half of the children had behavioral reactions to the visits, most frequently excitability or hyperactivity before visitation. Nearly three-fourths of these responses lasted one week or less, and about half occurred only on the visit day (Poehlmann et al., 2010). Poehlmann and colleagues (2008) examined how caregivers' managed young children's behaviors prior to, during, and after visits with incarcerated mothers. Their analyses revealed that caregivers lacked knowledge and tools on how to support children around visitation issues. Caregivers interpreted children's behaviors prior to and following visits as a source of great stress and they expressed concerns about how this might impact children and the mother-child relationship.

In a separate study, Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) conducted a qualitative analysis of caregivers' views of children's contact with incarcerated parents. Caregivers expressed both positive and negative feelings about parent-child prison visits. Although many caregivers wanted the child to visit the incarcerated parent, some caregivers said that they limited the amount of contact because of perceived behavioral changes, citing children's confusion, frustration, and being upset following visits with the imprisoned parent. Dallaire et al. (2009) associated greater visitation frequency with insecure

attachment patterns in children. What is important to note here, however, is that the visits in her study occurred through a window in a large, noisy room, in which children and caregivers were sometimes frisked or patted down as part of the visitation screening process (Dallaire et al., 2009). Such experiences surrounding visitation may frighten children, thus adversely affecting their sense of security, and potentially their well-being (Poehlmann et al., 2010).

Some research has considered the way in which institutional policies influence children's experiences of visitation with their incarcerated parent (Arditti, 2003; 2012; Poehlmann et al., 2010). In her research of 56 caregivers of children visiting an incarcerated family member in a jail in Virginia, Arditti (2003) documented the challenges associated with the visitation experience for these families. Specifically, caregivers described the difficulties of "no contact" visitation regulations for children, as well as disrespectful treatment by facility staff. This experience is not uncommon. In fact, in some correctional institutions, prisoners are prohibited from hugging, or holding their child on their lap during the visiting session (Hairston, 1998; 2003). Caregivers as well as incarcerated parents have reported wanting improved policies regarding visitation with family members, including child-friendly settings that have age-appropriate games, books and toys as existing conditions are not often conducive to children faring well (Arditti, 2003; Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002).

Moreover, all prison visitors—including children—are subjected to a high degree of scrutiny which can spawn feelings of insecurity and vulnerability (Comfort, 2008; Grinstead, Zack & Faigeles, 2001; Hairston, 1998; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005;

Peelo, Stewart, Stewart & Prior, 1991). Of course, anyone who enters a correctional institution can expect security protocols to be in place, yet the screening procedures are not equally applied to everyone. For instance, volunteers are rarely subjected to dog searches of their vehicles and bodies, nor do they have to wait for hours in line to go through a metal detector (Comfort, 2008). The differential treatment of visitors and volunteers is further evidence of “secondary prisonization” in that correctional staff—responsible for maintaining institutional order in an impersonal and highly controlled way—attempt to turn prison visitors into a submissive group that can be easily managed according to prison regulations (Comfort, 2008; Crawley, 2004).

Furthermore, children are often exposed to various stresses in order to maintain contact with an incarcerated parent, such as commuting far distances, having limited physical contact with their parent, and having to come to terms with leaving their parent behind once the visit has ended (Fuller, 1993; Grinstead et al., 2001; McDermott & King, 1992; Mignon & Ransford, 2012; Peart & Asquith, 1992). Compared with prisons, jails are typically closer in proximity to the inmate’s family members, as prisons are often located in remote areas (particularly women’s facilities). This can pose difficulties for families who desire to visit a prisoner (Christian, 2005; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007). Fuller (1993) discovered that 71 percent of visitors lived within 100 miles of the prison facility and 80 percent described the trip to the prison as easy or very easy. While geographic distance is known to play a role in whether or not family members visit an incarcerated loved one, there is little empirical knowledge on how this exhausting, resource demanding experience affects those who endure it—particularly for children



(Christian, 2005; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). Taken together, policies and barriers inherent in the visitation process may pose emotional and behavioral challenges for children coping with parental incarceration.

**Theoretical and empirical extensions.** One criticism that has been lodged against the literature on prison visitation and on the effects of parental incarceration on children more generally is that pre-incarceration life circumstances have been largely ignored (Bales & Mears, 2008; Johnston, 2006; Murray et al., 2012). Factors such as parental substance abuse and mental illness, family economic status and stability are important to consider when assessing child well-being in that prison visitation does not occur in isolation from other life circumstances (Tasca et al., 2014; Turanovic et al., 2012). Moreover, child age is another indicator that is in need of inclusion in the study of prison visitation and child well-being as attachment theories and secondary prisonization perspectives would suggest varying degrees of benefits or harm depending upon how old a child is during prison visitation (Arditti, 2012; Poehlmann et al., 2010).

One particular criticism of prior research using attachment perspectives is that these studies often treat parental incarceration as the only form of parental absence that children experience. This is problematic in that parental absence is not always a result of imprisonment. As previously mentioned, only 64% of incarcerated mothers and 47% of incarcerated fathers were residing with their children prior to imprisonment (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). What this suggests is that parent-child relationships are undeniably complex and that disrupted attachments that might invoke adverse child responses may be so pronounced that prison visitation alone is not enough to overcome them.

Equally important in assessing the effects of visitation on how children fare is the consideration of parental substance abuse and mental illness. It is well-documented that prisoners experience these pre-incarceration challenges at alarmingly high rates (Arditti & Few, 2006; Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Greene et al., 2000; Murray & Farrington, 2006; 2008a; Owen, 1998; Phillips et al., 2006; Phillips & Harm, 1998). Parental substance abuse and mental illness in particular can be severely disruptive to children's lives (Greene et al., 2000; Owen, 1998), which may play a role in their emotional and behavioral responses to contact with their imprisoned parent. It is important to note, though, that in some cases, parental imprisonment may be a reprieve for children and caregivers from an abusive and neglectful parent (Giordano, 2010; Turanovic et al., 2012).

Further embedded in the difficulties of parental mental illness and addiction for children is that of parent gender. In other words, child exposure to these parent stressors likely differs depending upon whether it is a mother or a father who is incarcerated (Owen, 1998; Greene et al., 2000; Tasca et al., 2014). Research shows that female prisoners have higher rates of mental illness and addiction than their male counterparts (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008) and that incarcerated women often suffer from an *accumulation* of stressors (Arditti & Few, 2006). While incarcerated fathers indeed suffer from these stressors as well, children of incarcerated mothers are at higher risk of exposure to these conditions given mothers' greater involvement in the lives of their children prior to incarceration (Arditti & Few, 2006; Owen, 1998; Tasca et al., 2014). As with prior parental involvement, it is essential to take into account these stressors to more

clearly assess the true effects of prison visitation on child emotional and behavioral well-being.

Furthermore, economic strain and family instability are common among this vulnerable group of children (Geller et al., 2011; Murray & Farrington, 2006; 2008a; Phillips et al., 2006; Turanovic et al., 2012; Wildeman, 2014). When a parent is imprisoned, any economic support previously provided by the parent disappears and the financial burden is shifted to the new or remaining parent or caregiver. What is more, the absence of a parent due to incarceration can lead to changes in family structure whereby children may be forced to change homes (i.e., residential instability) or schools (Mackintosh et al., 2006; Phillips et al., 2006; Rodriguez et al., 2009; Tasca et al., 2011; Wildeman, 2014). Not surprisingly, sudden residential changes can cause considerable stress and interruption in children's lives (Travis, 2005). In light of such challenges, caregivers of prisoners' children suffer from alarmingly high stress levels (Hanlon et al., 2007; Mackintosh et al., 2006). This has important implications for children, as overwhelmed caregivers are less equipped to help children cope with losing a parent to incarceration (Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza, 2001). Given such turmoil in the lives of these families, it is necessary to disentangle what prison visitation means for child well-being from other life circumstances that may influence how they fare during maternal and paternal incarceration.

Children's age is an additional factor to consider in investigating how children respond to parent-child prison visitation. Specifically, children's feelings regarding visitation may be expressed in different ways depending on their age (Poehlmann et al.,

2010). Young children are apt to express their confusion in an unclear manner and may not be able to voice their concerns verbally (Poehlmann, 2005b). As such, younger children may have particular difficulty visiting given the stress of the prison setting and their limited capabilities in expressing their feelings surrounding their parent's absence (Arditti, 2003; Poehlmann et al., 2010). For older children, this is less often the case given that as children develop, they may express their concerns about prison visitation because of advances in verbal skills which may assist in their coping (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Thus, the age of the child likely plays a role in how children fare in relation to prison visitation as older children may need less emotional support from caregivers during visits and can voice their opinions to caregivers more so than younger children. In response to these gaps in prior work, it is important that research takes into account parental attachment and secondary prisonization elements, prior life circumstances and stressors and child age.

### **Synthesis and Current Research**

As articulated earlier, I contend that caregiver type is key in predicting parent-child prison visitation, which is the first of two research questions assessed in this dissertation. Specifically, I expect to find that children with grandmother caregivers (during maternal incarceration) and children with mother caregivers (during paternal incarceration) are the most likely to visit their imprisoned parent, net of other relevant factors. Grandmother and mother caregivers have the most vested interests in maintaining a connection between parent and child as these caregivers are overwhelmed by the heavy

burden from child rearing alone (Denby, 2012; Day et al., 2005; Hanlon et al., 2007; Harman et al., 2007; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Roy & Dyson, 2005).

Facilitating parent-child prison visits allows these caregivers a sense of control, an opportunity to vent and make demands of prisoners who have let them down repeatedly in the past. In addition, these caregivers believe in the value of these children having a relationship with their incarcerated parent, even though many of these parents have not had quality relationships with their children on the outside (Arditti, 2012; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Denby, 2012). While mother and grandmother caregivers may view prison visitation as a means to jumpstart parenting among these prisoners, and make plans for the future, these expectations are often “idealized” in that relying solely on prison visitation as a means to resolve familial conflict, and address the accumulation of unmet needs among these prisoners is often unrealistic (Nurse, 2002; Day et al., 2005). Sadly, however, prison visitation is often the only available resource to attempt to remedy the multifaceted problems these families face.

In terms of the second focus of this dissertation, I explore how children who visit their incarcerated mothers and fathers in prison fare emotionally and behaviorally. Although limited, research that considers children’s emotional and behavioral responses to prison visitation are guided by two theoretical frameworks. First, attachment theories have been used to highlight the benefits associated with prison visitation for child well-being (Dallaire et al., 2009; Poehlmann, 2005a; 2005b; Poehlmann et al., 2008; Poehlmann et al., 2010). The second theoretical perspective that can explain how children

might fare poorly in response to prison visitation is that of secondary prisonization (Comfort, 2008).

In light of these contradictory perspectives, Arditti (2012) contends that prison visitation is a “paradox” in which visitation may be simultaneously good and bad for children. On one hand, visitation may ease negative feelings surrounding parental separation but at the same time spark fear and stress given the intimidating nature of the prison setting. No study to date has explored the notion of the visitation paradox (Arditti, 2012) in that research rarely captures factors from both attachment and secondary prisonization perspectives in the same study. Moreover, factors such as prior life circumstances (e.g., substance abuse, mental illness) have not always been consistently captured in prior work (Johnston, 2006; Murray & Farrington, 2008a). The same is also true of child age in that children across all developmental stages (e.g., preschool, school age, early adolescence, late adolescence) are rarely included in the same study (Poehlmann et al., 2010). Given that these indicators may play a role in how children fare in the context of prison visitation, it is important for researchers to consider them to paint a more complete picture of these families’ lives and experiences.

The current study addresses limitations of previous work in several key ways. First, whereas prior studies typically include only one form of parental incarceration, I include children with both incarcerated mothers and fathers. Given rising rates of female imprisonment (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), the study of children who experience maternal and paternal incarceration paints a more complete picture of imprisonment experienced by families. Second, this study focuses on children of inmates incarcerated in

prison and not jail. As Holleran and Spohn (2004) have pointed out, this is an important distinction as prison sentences are qualitatively different experiences than jail sentences. For instance, prison terms are longer in length than jail stints, prisons are typically located at greater distances from family members and prisons have different sets of regulations surrounding contact which have implications for families remaining connected through visitation. Third, the current research extends empirical knowledge beyond the African American family by the inclusion of White, Latino/a and Native American prisoners, caregivers and children. The majority of existing research has centered on Black families and as a result the literature does not adequately speak to imprisonment experienced by other racial and ethnic groups affected by high rates of incarceration—particularly in the southwest. Fourth, I am able to include prior life circumstances and stressors as well as child age, and barriers such as geographic distance to the correctional facility, all of which may play a role in whether or not children visit and in how children who do visit fare. In so doing, this dissertation advances theory through its focus on family systems within a mass imprisonment framework as well as its extension of the visitation paradox to consider pre-prison circumstances and age-graded effects.

## Chapter 3

### Data and Methods

#### Introduction

Guided by prior research, this dissertation investigates two research objectives by employing a mixed method approach. First, I examine children's connection to their incarcerated mothers and fathers, focusing on the influence of caregiver type in the facilitation of parent-child prison visitation. To reiterate, I quantitatively assess:

#### Paternal Incarceration

1. Are children experiencing paternal incarceration more likely to visit their father in prison when the primary caregiver is a mother rather than a different caregiver, net of relevant controls?

#### Maternal Incarceration

2. Are children experiencing maternal incarceration more likely to visit their mother in prison when the primary caregiver is a grandmother rather than a different caregiver, net of relevant controls?

Second, I examine the behavioral and emotional responses of children who visit their incarcerated mothers and fathers by qualitatively exploring the following questions:

3. What role do "visitation paradox" factors (i.e., parental attachment, secondary prisonization) play in how children respond emotionally and behaviorally to prison visitation, as perceived by caregivers?
4. How do pre-incarceration life circumstances (e.g., stressors) influence children's emotional and behavioral responses to prison visitation with an incarcerated parent, as perceived by caregivers?
5. How does age affect children's responses to prison visits?

In light of these research objectives, this chapter will focus on the following methodological considerations. First, I will describe the setting of the study by including population and demographic information on the state, county and prison system in which



the sample was drawn. I will also provide background information on the state prison system, including number of facilities, classification and housing procedures, and prison visitation protocols. Given that the current study is comprised of two distinct objectives, I will discuss the methodology pertaining to each research question separately.

Accordingly, the first section in this chapter will cover the relationship between caregiver type and the likelihood of parent-child prison visitation. The second section of this chapter will cover how children fare in the context of prison visitation. Within each of these two sections, I will detail the data sources used to conduct the analyses, including the sampling strategies employed, rates of participation, and the representativeness of the samples. I will then describe the units of analysis, followed by a discussion of the measures and thematic codes included in each investigation and analytic strategies. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a section that reiterates the full focus of the dissertation and the contribution of the present research.

## **Setting**

The data used for the current study come from 1) interviews with 300 men and 300 women prisoners incarcerated in the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC) who self-identified as being a parent to at least one minor biological, adopted or step child (N=1400) in 2010<sup>1</sup>; and 2) interviews with caregivers of children who experienced maternal and paternal incarceration in late 2010/early 2011 and who reside in Maricopa County, Arizona (N=100). The setting of this study in the southwest allows for a glimpse into parental incarceration in an understudied region of the United States. According to the latest estimates, nearly six million people live in the state of Arizona, which covers

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<sup>1</sup> Over 97% of children were reported by prisoners to be biological children.

approximately 113,000 square miles (State of Arizona, 2013). The majority of the state's population lives in Maricopa County (roughly four million people), which is the fourth most populated county in the U.S. (Maricopa County, 2010). Much of the literature on incarceration has relied on predominately African American samples. One of the central contributions of this study is that it is able to extend research to Latino/a, Native American and White prisoners and their families, given this state's racially and ethnically diverse population. Specifically, roughly 60% of Arizona residents are identified as White, nearly 30% are Latino/a, 5% are American Indian, and 4% are African American (FedStats, 2009).

The incarcerated population in the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC) is also diverse. As of early 2010 when the data for the present study were collected, there were approximately 40,611 inmates incarcerated in ADC; 37,144 were men and 3,467 were women (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2010a). Among the male prisoners, approximately 39% were White, 41% were Latino, 5% were Native American and 13% were African American. Among the female inmates, half were White, approximately 30% were Latina, 8% were American Indian and nearly 11% were African American (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2010a).

Arizona has a total of 15 prisons, of which 10 are state-run and five are private facilities. Of these 15 institutions, only one prison houses female inmates (ASPC-Perryville). When inmates first arrive in ADC custody, they go through an intake process to calculate their classification level (i.e., minimum, medium, close or maximum), which is used to determine housing placements (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2010b).

Because there is only one female correctional facility, women go through intake in the Perryville Complex and are housed in a unit within this facility that corresponds to their classification level. For male prisoners, the process differs in that all men are initially confined in one facility that is used exclusively for intake (ASPC-Alhambra) (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2010b). Confinement in the Alhambra Complex can last from a few days to several weeks, depending on the number of inmates awaiting classification, intake resources (e.g., staffing), and available bed space in the facility in which the prisoner will be housed. As a result of this intake process, *all* male prisoners are confined in one institution for a short period of time. Alhambra becomes an ideal setting for researchers attempting to sample the male inmate population in Arizona.

Despite the strength of sampling male prisoners from this facility, inmates are not yet eligible for visitation, however. Once inmates are transferred to their designated prison unit from Alhambra, the visitation process may be initiated. It is important to note here that since father-child prison visitation could not be captured during data collection at Alhambra, we inquired about father-child visitation among men who have served a prior prison term (57% of men had served at least one prior prison sentence). Thus, parent-child visitation is captured for all female inmates (with reference to the current imprisonment term) and for only those men who have served at least one prior incarceration term (with reference to the most recent prior incarceration period).

The Arizona Department of Corrections allows prisoners to receive visits from a maximum of 10 persons, who must first be approved by the agency (e.g., background

check) (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2011)<sup>2</sup>. Individuals over the age of 18 who wish to visit an inmate in ADC may apply for themselves and any applicable children once a prisoner has completed intake and is housed in the prison unit that was determined by his or her classification level<sup>3</sup>. Given that visitation is not permitted during intake and that visitation applications can take several weeks to approve, visitors generally are not able to visit a prisoner until he or she has been incarcerated in ADC for at least 30 days (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2011).

Two data sources will be used to carry out the investigations of both research objectives. I will now discuss the data and methods used to test each question separately.

### **Caregiver Type and Parent-Child Visitation**

**Data.** To satisfy the first objective of this study, I examine the relationship between caregiver type and whether children visit their incarcerated mothers and fathers in prison. Since I expect caregiver type to differ by gender, I analyze maternal and paternal incarceration separately. For those experiencing maternal incarceration, I rely on quantitative data gathered from structured interviews with 300 incarcerated mothers of 732 children to determine if children who reside with grandmother caregivers are more likely than children residing with other caregivers to visit their mother in prison, net of

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<sup>2</sup> All visitors must have a government-issued form of identification. This policy poses unique challenges for undocumented men, women and children who wish to visit an inmate in ADC.

<sup>3</sup> In 2011, the Arizona Department of Corrections instituted a policy that required all visitors to pay a one-time \$25 fee when applying to visit an inmate. It is important to note that this policy was implemented after data collection for the current project.

relevant controls. Upon the removal of missing data, a sample of 279 mothers of 684 children is produced for analysis<sup>4</sup>.

For paternal incarceration cases, I test whether children with a mother caregiver are more likely than children with other caregivers to visit an incarcerated father in prison, above and beyond other factors. The data used to test this hypothesis are compiled from structured interviews with 300 incarcerated fathers of 668 children. As discussed previously, an important distinction between the maternal and paternal incarceration samples, however, is that men were interviewed during intake and therefore were not yet eligible for prison visitation. Since the majority of these 300 fathers have served a prior prison term in ADC (57%), male inmates were asked about child visitation during their last incarceration period (when applicable). Accordingly, 171 incarcerated fathers were asked about prison visitation with their corresponding 398 children during their prior prison term<sup>5</sup>. Upon the removal of missing cases where the children were yet to be born, 143 fathers of 300 children comprise the final paternal incarceration sample used in the analysis of caregiver type and father-child prison visitation<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> For the maternal incarceration sample, most missing data were missing on the dependent variable (visit yes/no) given that some women were not yet eligible for prison visitation. Other missing data included women not knowing certain life circumstances about their children (e.g., caregiver).

<sup>5</sup> My inability to capture parent-child prison visitation among fathers who are serving their first prison term in ADC is a limitation of the current study. To consider how these groups of men may vary, I compared fathers with prior prison histories to those who do not across multiple characteristics. Fathers who have served at least one prior prison term (the 171 fathers of the 300 fathers included in the present analysis) are less likely to have committed a public order offense, more likely to be property offenders, slightly older, and are more likely to be African American than those fathers without prior ADC histories. Considering that the majority of men incarcerated in ADC have served a prior prison term, examining child visitation patterns among this group is undoubtedly important.

<sup>6</sup> For the paternal sample, 93 of the 398 children of fathers included in the study were born after their father's prior prison term and therefore were excluded from analysis. The remaining missing data was due to fathers not knowing the life circumstances of their children (e.g., caregiver).

These data come from a larger study on parental incarceration in Arizona<sup>7</sup>. This project included extensive, structured interviews with a sample of male and female prisoners who self-identified as being the parent of at least one biological, step or adopted child under the age of 18. The interviews touched upon a multitude of domains including: parent/child living situation before incarceration, caregiver information and current child living situation, in-prison contact and visitation, child behavior and service needs and parental factors and stressors.

Arizona State University researchers, including Dr. Nancy Rodriguez, myself and three other graduate students set out to conduct interviews with 300 incarcerated mothers and 300 incarcerated fathers. This investigation was carried out between February and May of 2010 in the Arizona State Prison Complex-Phoenix Alhambra Reception and Treatment Center (for the paternal incarceration sample) and the Arizona State Prison Complex-Perryville in the San Pedro, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, Santa Maria and Piestewa Units (for the maternal incarceration sample). Interviewing male prisoners during the intake process allowed for sampling of male inmates across all classification levels and maximized the use of limited resources by eliminating the need to travel to all ADC institutions<sup>8</sup>. Because approximately 75% of female prisoners in ADC are housed in minimum security units, interviews with women prisoners were conducted in three minimum security units and in one unit that housed a combination of both minimum and

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<sup>7</sup> For a full description of the larger study, the final report may be obtained at: [http://www.azcjc.gov/ACJC.Web/Pubs/Home/COIP\\_Final.pdf](http://www.azcjc.gov/ACJC.Web/Pubs/Home/COIP_Final.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> The paternal incarceration sample included male prisoners classified as minimum, medium, close and maximum security which covers all offense types. The only exclusion from our sample were maximum security sex offenders as correctional staff did not permit us to interview them given the safety risk posed by having these prisoners out of their cells to undergo an interview. Maximum security sex offenders, however, are a small portion of the male prisoner population in ADC (less than 5%).

medium security prisoners, in an effort to obtain a representative sample of the female prisoner population.

At the start of each day of data collection, researchers were provided with a current count sheet of all prisoners in the unit. From that list, every ninth prisoner was identified and subsequently approached by a member of the research team. Arizona Department of Corrections staff did not screen or recruit prisoners for participation in the study. Correctional staff and a researcher would locate the randomly identified prisoner, determine eligibility and ascertain consent. If the prisoner agreed, prison staff would escort the inmate to the designated interview location. Prisoners were free to decline to participate and they did not receive any incentives for participating in the interview. Interviews between researchers and the inmates were private as prison staff were not present during the interviews.

A total of 1,005 prisoners were approached by the research team, including 554 men and 451 women. Among those approached, fewer than seven percent of men and four percent of women declined to participate in the study. Since these data collection efforts were centered on parental imprisonment, not all inmates who were approached were eligible for participation. For instance, roughly 30% of men and 14% of women indicated that they were not parents to any children, approximately 10% of men and 17% of women reported that they were parents of only adult children and two percent of men indicated that their children had either passed away or were not yet born (e.g., mother is currently pregnant). As a result, 58.0% of men and 68.9% of women approached in ADC self-identified as being the parent of at least one child under the age of 18.

The figures in these data are comparable to national estimates outlined in the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2008) Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), which is a primary source for information on prisoners and their children. In addition, researchers assessed the representativeness of the approached sample by comparing it to the racial and ethnic composition of the ADC prisoner population. While Latino men were slightly under represented and American Indian men were slightly overrepresented, all other racial and ethnic groups mirrored the larger ADC prison population along racial/ethnic lines.

All data were entered into an SPSS database by two graduate students in 2010. Data were subsequently merged with official ADC records. Given the extensive nature of the prisoner interviews that included information on parent-child prison contact, the current caregivers of children and pre-incarceration living circumstances, parent stressors and prior involvement, these data are well-suited to test the relationship between caregiver type and parent-child prison visitation. A coding scheme for all variables included in the analysis is provided in Table 1.

**Dependent variables.** Whether or not a child visited his or her incarcerated mother (as reported by mothers) or father (as reported by fathers) are the two outcome measures used in the current analyses. Both outcome measures are dichotomous<sup>9</sup>. Specifically, children who never had a prison visit, according to their incarcerated mother

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<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, a continuous measure of parent-child visitation is not available. During interviews, visitation was captured using a categorical variable that measured frequency of visitation including: never, daily, weekly, at least once per month, and less than once per month. Given the limited variation across these categories, ordinal logit models could not be run to predict visitation frequency. As a result, the measure was recoded as a dichotomous variable to reflect whether or not the parent had ever received a prison visit from his or her child.



were coded as “0” and children who had visited, according to their incarcerated mother were coded as “1”. Approximately 45% of children were reported by mothers to have visited in prison. During paternal incarceration, visitation was captured only for men who had served a prior prison term in ADC (as discussed previously). If a father reported that his child visited him in prison during his last prison term that child was coded as “1” and if the father reported that his child had never visited him during his prior prison term, that child was coded as “0”. Slightly less than one-third of children were reported to have visited their father in prison (31%).

**Key independent variables.** Caregiver type is the key independent variable in the present analysis. In order to capture caregiver type, male and female prisoners were asked to identify the primary caregiver of each of their children (e.g., other parent, grandparent, foster care/institutional placement, other relative, non-family member). Given that I expect children in the care of *grandmothers* to be the most likely to visit incarcerated mothers, I created a dummy variable for “grandmother” (1=yes; 0=no) to be used in the maternal model. Forty-two percent of maternal children were reported to be in the care of a grandmother. On the other hand, since I expect that children in the care of their *mothers* will be the most likely to visit their fathers in prison, I created a binary variable for “mother” (1=yes; 0=no) to be used in analysis. Roughly 75% of paternal children were reported by fathers to be cared for by their mothers.

**Relevant controls.** Based on prior research, I account for child situational factors, child demographics, parental stressors and institutional barriers that may play a role in whether or not children visit their mothers and fathers in prison.

Specifically, for both maternal and paternal models, child situational factors are captured with the following variables reported by the prisoners: 1) whether or not the *caregiver receives public assistance* (1=yes; 0=no); 2) *residential mobility*, which is a continuous measure of the number of times the child moved residences in the past year; and 3) a *prior parental involvement* scale. I constructed the prior parental involvement scale using three parent-reported measures: (a) whether or not the prisoner reported living with his or her child in the month prior to incarceration (1=yes; 0=no); (b) whether or not the prisoner reported serving as the primary daily care provider to his or her child in the 30 days before incarceration (1=yes; 0=no); and (c) whether or not the prisoner reported that he or she was the primary financial supporter of his or her child in the month before incarceration (1=yes; 0=no). Principal components analysis confirmed that these three items were unidimensional (eigenvalue = 2.18, loadings > .72). This scale is also characterized by a high level of reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ).

I control for several demographic characteristics of children (as reported by prisoners). *Gender* of the child is included where boys are coded as "0" and girls are coded as "1". Child race/ethnicity is captured with dummy variables for *White*, *Black*,

*Latino/a*, and *American Indian*, (Blacks are the reference category) that reflect the race/ethnicity of the incarcerated parent as represented in official ADC records<sup>10</sup>.

To control for parent stressors, I include binary measures of *parental mental illness*, which reflects whether or not the prisoner reported that he or she has been professionally diagnosed with a mental health problem (1=yes; 0=no), *parental substance abuse* which captures whether or not the prisoner reported using illicit drugs in the month before confinement (1=yes; 0=no) and *parental rights terminated* which reflects whether or not prisoners indicated that their parental rights to their children had been terminated by a court (1=yes; 0=no). In addition, I include a continuous measure for the number of *prior prison terms*, self-reported by the prisoner. Dummy measures for current offense type (e.g., *violent*, *property*, *drug*, *public order*) provided by ADC are used, where property offense is the reference category. An official measure of *sentence length* (in months) is logged and also included in analyses.

Lastly, two measures that reflect institutional barriers to visitation are used. First, *geographic distance* reflects the distance from the prisoner's home zip code (provided by ADC) to the prison complex in which he or she is incarcerated. The distance was computed for each case using Google Maps. If the distance was greater than 101 miles, it was coded as "1", if the distance was 100 miles or less, it is coded as "0"<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Children are classified as the same race/ethnicity as the focal prisoner as data is not available on the race/ethnicity of the child or the child's other parent. As such, it cannot be determined if children are biracial or multiracial.

<sup>11</sup> An official measure of the prisoner's zip code from his/her home address in ADC records was used. While the prisoner's zip code may differ from that of the child's, it was the only available measure to estimate geographic distance.

Second, *minimum* (1=yes; 0=no) is used to capture prisoner security level as reported from ADC records.

**Unit of analysis.** In my quantitative assessment of caregiver type and the likelihood of prison visitation, the focus is on the *child's* likelihood of visiting their mothers and fathers in prison (as reported by prisoners). Accordingly, children are the unit of analysis. As previously explained, caregiver type is expected to differ depending on the gender of the incarcerated parent.

**Analytic strategy.** My analysis proceeded in two stages. First, I examined bivariate relationships between my key independent variables of interest (i.e., caregiver type) and prison visitation between children and their incarcerated parent. Specifically, I assessed the bivariate association between children with grandmother caregivers and mother-child prison visits. Then, I investigated the bivariate relationship between children with mother caregivers and father-child prison visits. Second, multivariate regression models were estimated to examine whether children being cared for by (1) grandmothers during maternal incarceration; and (2) mothers during paternal incarceration, were more likely to visit their incarcerated parents, net of relevant factors. Given the distribution of my dependent variables, logistic regression analyses were conducted (Long, 1997). Unstandardized coefficients and odds ratios are reported. Since prisoners often have more than one child, I controlled for within-family clustering in this analysis. Specifically, clustered robust standard errors were used to correct for correlations between children from the same parent.

## **Prison Visitation and Child Responses**

**Data.** To carry out the second phase of this dissertation, I relied on data collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 100 caregivers of 218 children experiencing maternal or paternal incarceration. Since this qualitative analysis centers on the emotional and behavioral responses of children who have visited an incarcerated parent as perceived by their caregiver, a randomly identified sample of 40 children who have visited a mother or father at least once is used (based on caregiver reports). The caregiver interviews consisted of open-ended questions that covered several key dimensions in the lives of prisoners' families including: caregiving histories and living situations of the children, parent-child relationship information, in-prison visitation, child responses to visitation, expectations surrounding the parent's release, and child behavior and family service needs.

This study is an extension of the Arizona parental incarceration project discussed in the previous section. Relying on child caregiver information provided by prisoners, three members of the research team set out to recruit 100 caregivers to participate in the study through phone calls and letters mailed to caregivers' residences. During phone calls and included in letters written to caregivers, the purpose of the study was conveyed, confidentiality was guaranteed, and we asked for and encouraged caregiver participation. We further related that participation in the study was voluntary and that caregivers would receive a \$50 cash incentive for a 60 to 90 minute interview.

Given resource limitations, only prisoners with caregivers and children residing in Maricopa County were included. A random sample of 75 incarcerated mothers and 75

incarcerated fathers, with home addresses in Maricopa County, was compiled from the full sample of 600 prisoners to generate a caregiver sample affected by both paternal and maternal incarceration. Among the 75 paternal incarceration cases that we attempted to reach, 16 had a disconnected phone number or an invalid/incorrect number. Two caregivers did not respond to our contact attempts and two other paternal caregivers declined participation in the study.

Among the 75 maternal caregivers that we attempted to contact, seven had a disconnected number or an invalid/incorrect number. Eight of these maternal caregivers did not respond to our contact efforts and two declined to participate in the study. Among caregivers interested in participating in the study, we scheduled an interview date and time with a member of the research team. Interviews continued until we completed a total of 100 caregiver interviews. Nearly all interviews were conducted in private offices in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. For some caregiver participants, however, commuting to the downtown ASU campus was not feasible given their lack of transportation, or physical ailments that prohibited coming to campus. In an effort to accommodate these caregivers, a researcher conducted phone interviews in lieu of a face-to-face meeting. The 100 caregiver interviews were conducted in English and Spanish between October, 2010 and March, 2011.

The interviews with caregivers provided rich, detailed, descriptions about various aspects of the lives of children and caregivers experiencing maternal and paternal incarceration. The interview questions were open-ended and researchers probed participants in their responses to questions, resulting frequently in a back and forth

dialogue between caregiver and researcher. Although the interview style was very much open and free flowing, the interviews were semi-structured with researchers relying on a questionnaire to ensure that key points were covered in all interviews. Specifically, the interviews began with questions pertaining to the living situations and guardianship histories of the children, followed by questions related to informal and formal support received by the caregivers in caring for the children and any struggles and/or barriers in obtaining such support. The next set of questions focused on parent-child contact, including prior parental involvement and in-prison parent-child visitation. In particular, caregivers were asked about the barriers/obstacles in facilitating contact between prisoners and children (for those who did take the children to visit their incarcerated parent in prison) and for children who did not visit their incarcerated parent, caregivers were probed for reasons behind this decision. Caregivers were then asked about how children respond to the level of contact they have with their incarcerated parent. Additional topics covered in the interviews with caregivers included expected child adjustment upon the parent's release and the caregiver's expected role in the child's life, as well as questions pertaining to caregiver concerns over existing child behavior and family service needs. The interviews concluded by asking the caregiver to provide demographic information on themselves and the children (e.g., race/ethnicity, age) as well as alternative contact information that the research team could use in reaching out to them in the future.

All interviews were recorded and were later transcribed by a professional transcriptionist<sup>12</sup>. The detailed accounts articulated by caregivers yielded valuable data on the experiences of those affected by paternal and maternal imprisonment. These nuanced data are highly useful for exploring parent-child prison visitation and child well-being, as they include factors related to parental attachment and institutional barriers linked to secondary prisonization. As such, these data cover the elements within the prison visitation paradox (Arditti, 2012) that have not been fully considered in previous studies.

**Thematic codes.** Guided by the notion of the visitation paradox (Arditti, 2012) which includes theoretical dimensions of attachment (Bowlby 1969; 1973; 1980) and secondary prisonization (Comfort, 2008), I assess the behavioral and emotional responses of children who visit their incarcerated mother or father.

*Child emotional and behavioral responses.* To explore how children who visit an imprisoned parent fare, caregivers were asked to discuss how children respond emotionally and behaviorally to prison visitation with their incarcerated parent. Positive and negative internalizing and externalizing behaviors perceived by caregivers are identified and coded. Examples of negative internalizing behaviors include excessive crying, withdrawn behavior, depressive symptoms, and attitudinal changes. Examples of negative externalizing behaviors consist of aggression, temper tantrums, and acting out. Positive child responses to visitation include the absence of negative internalizing and externalizing behaviors (e.g., cheerful attitude, performing well in school).

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<sup>12</sup> Two interviews were conducted in Spanish. These two interviews were excluded from analyses, however, as these two caregivers and corresponding children were not visiting.



*Visitation paradox elements.* To measure parental attachment, caregivers were asked to describe the relations between the child and his or her incarcerated parent before incarceration. The level of closeness between parent and child are coded. To capture secondary prisonization factors, caregivers were asked about how (if at all) institutional barriers and the correctional setting more broadly played a role in prison contact between children and incarcerated parents. Factors related to visitation regulations, treatment of visitors by staff, and the availability of child-friendly visiting rooms are identified and coded.

*Prior life circumstances.* Prior parental absence, parental substance abuse, and mental illness (as reported by caregivers) are coded and included in analysis as these life stressors are common experiences among prisoners' families. The way in which these experiences shape behavioral and emotional well-being among children during prison visitation is an important and understudied dimension to this line of inquiry. Moreover, children of incarcerated mothers may have had greater exposure to an accumulation of stressors (Arditti & Few, 2006; Owen, 1998; Tasca et al., 2014) and as a result may influence how children respond to contact.

*Child age.* The age of a child may affect how he or she reacts to prison visitation, as younger children may have difficulty expressing their feelings verbally (Poehlmann et al., 2010). Accordingly, child age is coded and considered in the context of the prison visitation experience for the child as described by the caregiver.

**Unit of analysis.** In this qualitative exploration into the effects of prison visitation, the focus is on how the *child* responds to prison visits with an imprisoned mother or father. As such, children are the unit of analysis. Since these data come from interviews with caregivers, however, participants often discussed more than one child during the interview. To address the issue of nested data in this qualitative analysis, I randomly identified one child per included case (N=40).

**Analytic strategy.** As mentioned earlier, the second phase of data collection included in-depth interviews with 100 caregivers of 218 children. Among the full sample, 120 children had visited their incarcerated parent at least once, as reported by the respective 54 caregivers. To carry out my analysis on the emotional and behavioral responses of children who visit an incarcerated parent, I purposively sampled 40 children across four key age groups from the 120 children who had visited a mother or father in prison, according to caregiver reports. I sampled by age given its likely influence on how children respond to prison visitation. Specifically, from the roster of 120 children, I divided the list of children into the following four groups: *preschool* (age 5 and younger); *school age* (age 6 to 11); *early adolescence* (age 12 to 14) and *late adolescence* (age 15 to 18). I randomly identified 10 children from each age group. If I selected a sibling of a child previously identified for inclusion, I reselected another case in order to ensure that the 40 children were part of 40 distinct family units.

Among the 40 children, 55% had an incarcerated mother and 45% had an incarcerated father. Nearly half of these children were identified by caregivers as Latino (45%), approximately 27% were African American, 18% were White and 10% were

American Indian. There were slightly more boys included in the sample (55%) and given the sampling strategy, the children were 10.3 years of age, on average. Half of the children were in the care of a grandparent, 43% were cared for by their other parent and 7% had another family member serving as their caregiver. The incarcerated parents of these children were serving a mean sentence of three years.

Once the final sample of 40 children who visited an incarcerated parent was identified, I systematically reviewed and coded the positive and negative responses of the children to visitation as perceived by caregivers, along with visitation paradox elements, parental involvement and stressors and child age. Next, thematic content analyses were used to capture the major themes present in caregivers' accounts (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). The content analyses were conducted using the qualitative software Dedoose—a web-based application designed by social scientists in which researchers are able to organize transcripts, highlight excerpts and code user-defined terms. In addition, I wrote a series of analytic memos to further explore and link themes among and across cases. Lastly, frequencies of the types of child reactions to prison visits as perceived by caregivers and descriptive information on these children were produced in SPSS.

## **Conclusion**

This study furthers our understanding of the collateral consequences of imprisonment by assessing the ability of children and their incarcerated parents to remain connected despite their vulnerable status and the institutional barriers confronting them. It expands upon prior research by drawing on a racially and ethnically diverse sample of male and female prisoners and caregivers in the southwest to explore the likelihood of parental prison visitation. Moreover, this study contributes to research on what prison visitation means for child well-being, as these data are well-suited to examine important dimensions of parental attachment and secondary prisonization factors. Both data sets include pre-incarceration stressors and life circumstances of prisoners' children that are important to consider in assessing the predictors and effects of prison visitation during parental incarceration. And, through the inclusion of both paternal and maternal cases, as well as a wide range of children's ages, this study sheds light on potential differences in these experiences for children. In addition, this dissertation contributes to broader work on the imprisonment period itself by examining the complex phenomenon of prison visitation.

## Chapter 4

### Results for Caregiver Type and the Likelihood of Prison Visitation

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the results from descriptive and multivariate analyses that predicted the probability of mother-child and father-child prison visitation. Accordingly, bivariate statistics and logistic regression analyses were conducted and are presented for maternal and paternal incarceration separately. First, however, I describe all variables under examination and the coding scheme for both maternal and paternal incarceration cases (see Table 1).

The dependent variable in the present analyses was *ever visited* (yes/no) as reported by the incarcerated parent. Consistent with the latest national estimates on parents in state prison (Glaze & Maruscak, 2008), roughly 45% of children were reported by their incarcerated mothers to have visited at least once. Among children experiencing paternal incarceration, less than one-third (31.3%) of children were reported by imprisoned fathers to have ever visited.

Given the limited empirical knowledge on the role of caregiver type in the facilitation of parental prison visitation, this research attempted to fill that gap in the literature. To capture caregiver type, I relied on two dummy variables: *grandmother* (maternal incarceration) and *mother* (paternal incarceration). Children in the care of other caregivers included other parents, other relatives (e.g., aunt, uncle, cousin), non-relatives (e.g., friend), and state placements (e.g., foster care, group home). Importantly, these data were well-suited to carry out an investigation on caregiver type and prison visitation

given the diverse family systems of the prisoners interviewed. During maternal imprisonment, 42.1% of children were reported by mothers to be cared for by a grandmother. During paternal incarceration, approximately 75% of children were reported by fathers to have a mother as their primary caregiver. Results are consistent with national estimates on child placements during maternal and paternal incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

In addition, I included several child situational factors that prior research suggests (Phillips et al., 2006; Tasca et al., 2011) might play a role in whether children visit their incarcerated parent. For children experiencing the incarceration of a mother, more than half (56.6%) lived with a caregiver who was reported to be on public assistance, according to prisoner reports. In paternal incarceration cases, fathers reported that 62.3% of their children were in a household in which their primary caretaker was a public aid recipient. Moreover, as incarcerated mothers indicated, their children moved an average of 0.5 times in the past year. Children of incarcerated fathers were reported by their fathers to have moved 0.8 times in the past 12 months, on average. Using the same prior parental involvement scale as Tasca et al. (2014), three prisoner-reported dummy variables were included: (1) whether the parent lived with his or her child during the month before incarceration; (2) whether the parent served as the primary daily care provider to the child during the month prior to incarceration; and (3) whether the parent was the primary financial supporter of the child during the month before confinement. Mothers reported a mean parental involvement factor score of 0.4. Fathers reported a mean factor score of 0.2.

I controlled for child demographics including gender, race/ethnicity and age in the current analyses. Approximately 52% of children experiencing maternal incarceration were boys and 48% were girls, as reported by mothers. Among children experiencing paternal imprisonment, 45% were boys and 55% were girls, as indicated by fathers. The majority of maternal children were White (44.3%), followed by Latino/a (35.3%), African American (11%) and American Indian (9.4%). Nearly half of the paternal children were Latino/a (45.7%), 25.7% were African American, 20.3% were White and 8.3% were American Indian. Incarcerated mothers reported that their children were 9.1 years of age, on average. Incarcerated fathers reported that their children had a mean age of 10.1 years.

Grounded in prior work, a host of parent stressors were used in analyses (Arditti, 2012; Murray et al., 2012; Poehlmann et al., 2008). Data revealed that nearly half of children's incarcerated mothers reported having been diagnosed with a mental illness (49.1%). More than one-quarter (28.7%) of children's incarcerated fathers indicated that they had been diagnosed with a mental health problem. Moreover, self-reports of parental substance abuse in the month prior to incarceration were quite high, although consistent with national estimates (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Specifically, nearly 60% of children's incarcerated mothers reported using illicit substances in the 30 days prior to confinement. Sixty-three percent of incarcerated fathers reported illicit substance use in the same period.

Table 1. Coding Scheme.

|                                   |                                  | Maternal<br>%<br>(N=684) | Paternal<br>%<br>(N=300) |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <u>Dependent Variables</u>        |                                  |                          |                          |
| <u>Parent-child visitation</u>    |                                  |                          |                          |
| Visited ever                      | 1=Yes; 0=No                      | 44.6                     | 31.3                     |
| <u>Independent Variables</u>      |                                  |                          |                          |
| <u>Caregiver type<sup>1</sup></u> |                                  |                          |                          |
| Mother (paternal cases)           | 1=Yes; 0=No                      | ---                      | 74.7                     |
| Grandmother (maternal cases)      | 1=Yes; 0=No                      | 42.1                     | ---                      |
| <u>Child situational factors</u>  |                                  |                          |                          |
| Caregiver public assistance       | 1=Yes; 0=No                      | 56.6                     | 62.3                     |
| Residential mobility              | Moves in past year (M; SD)       | 0.5; 0.9                 | 0.8; 1.1                 |
| Prior parental involvement        | Factor score (M; SD)             | 0.4; 0.9                 | 0.2; 1.0                 |
| <u>Child demographics</u>         |                                  |                          |                          |
| <u>Gender</u>                     |                                  |                          |                          |
| Boys                              | Boys are reference category      | 51.9                     | 45.0                     |
| Girls                             |                                  | 48.1                     | 55.0                     |
| <u>Race/Ethnicity</u>             |                                  |                          |                          |
| White                             |                                  | 44.3                     | 20.3                     |
| Black                             | Blacks are reference category    | 11.0                     | 25.7                     |
| Latino/a                          |                                  | 35.3                     | 45.7                     |
| American Indian                   |                                  | 9.4                      | 8.3                      |
| Child age                         | In years (M; SD)                 | 9.1; 4.6                 | 10.1; 4.5                |
| <u>Parent stressors</u>           |                                  |                          |                          |
| Prisoner mental illness           | 1=Yes; 0=No                      | 49.1                     | 28.7                     |
| Prisoner substance abuse          | 1=Yes; 0=No                      | 59.8                     | 63.3                     |
| Parental rights terminated        | 1=Yes; 0=No                      | 19.9                     | 9.7                      |
| Prior prison terms                | Number prior terms (M; SD)       | 0.6; 0.9                 | 2.1; 1.3                 |
| <u>Current offense type</u>       |                                  |                          |                          |
| Violent                           |                                  | 20.5                     | 23.0                     |
| Property                          | (Property is reference category) | 39.9                     | 29.7                     |
| Drug                              |                                  | 28.7                     | 27.7                     |
| Public order                      |                                  | 11.0                     | 19.7                     |
| Sentence length (ln)              | Natural log of sentence length   | 5.7; 3.2                 | 5.0; 3.0                 |



Table 1. Coding Scheme (continued).

|                               |                                      | Maternal<br>%<br>(N=684) | Paternal<br>%<br>(N=300) |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <u>Institutional barriers</u> |                                      |                          |                          |
| 101 miles or more             | Geographic distance (1=Yes;<br>0=No) | 29.4                     | 55.3                     |
| Minimum security              | 1=Yes; 0=No                          | 81.0                     | 46.7                     |

<sup>1</sup>Children not residing with mothers (paternal cases) or grandmothers (maternal cases) are with “other caregivers” which include: other parent; other relative; non-relative (e.g., friend) or state placement.

Furthermore, approximately 20% of children’s imprisoned mothers reported that they had their parental rights severed by a court. Ten percent of children’s imprisoned fathers reported that their parental rights were terminated. Female prisoners reported serving an average of 0.6 prior prison terms. Male prisoners reported having served 2.1 prior prison sentences, on average. Official ADC records revealed that the majority of mothers were incarcerated for property crimes (39.9%), followed by drug offenses (28.7%), violent crimes (20.5%) and public order offenses (11.0%). Thirty percent of fathers were imprisoned for property offenses, 27.7% were confined for drug crimes, 23% for violent crimes and 19.7% for public order offenses. ADC data showed these imprisoned mothers serving average sentence lengths of 5.7 years. For incarcerated fathers, the mean prison term was five years.

Two measures were used to control for institutional barriers in the present analysis: geographic distance and prison security level. Both factors have been included in prior work on prison visitation (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Poehlmann et al., 2008; Stacer, 2012; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). Based on official ADC records,

approximately 29% of maternal children resided at least 101 miles from Arizona's sole female correctional institution. The fact that the majority of families of women inmates in ADC live close to the female prison is not surprising in that the women's prison is located on the outskirts of Maricopa County, the most populated county in the state. Among paternal children, more than half were found to live 101 miles or more from the prison complex that housed their father, according to official records. In terms of prison security level, similar to the larger ADC population, 81% of these mothers were classified as minimum security inmates as were 47% of fathers.

As noted previously, in light of the distinct hypotheses surrounding caregiver type and the likelihood of parental prison visitation depending upon which parent was incarcerated, analyses were conducted separately for maternal and paternal incarceration. In the following sections, results are presented accordingly.

### **Descriptive Statistics of Maternal Prison Visitation**

Table 2 presents the independent variables by mother-child prison visitation. Descriptive analyses revealed several significant relationships between independent variables and mother-child prison visits. Based on maternal reports, children who have visited their mother in prison were significantly more likely to be in the care of a grandmother caregiver than other caregiver types (e.g., fathers, other relatives, non-relatives, state custody). In fact, more than half of children who visited their mother lived with their grandmother versus 33% of children who did not visit, according to incarcerated mothers.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Maternal Prison Visitation.

|                                  | Child Did Not Visit<br>(N=379)<br>% | Child Visited<br>(N=305)<br>% |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <u>Caregiver type</u>            |                                     |                               |
| Grandmother***                   | 33.0                                | 53.4                          |
| <u>Child situational factors</u> |                                     |                               |
| Caregiver public assistance*     | 53.0                                | 61.0                          |
| Residential mobility             | 0.6; 0.9                            | 0.5; 0.8                      |
| Prior parental involvement***    | -0.3; 0.9                           | 0.3; 0.9                      |
| <u>Child demographics</u>        |                                     |                               |
| Gender                           |                                     |                               |
| Boys                             | 51.2                                | 52.8                          |
| Girls                            | 48.8                                | 47.2                          |
| Race/Ethnicity                   |                                     |                               |
| White                            | 43.3                                | 45.6                          |
| Black†                           | 9.2                                 | 13.1                          |
| Latino/a                         | 36.7                                | 33.8                          |
| American Indian†                 | 10.8                                | 7.5                           |
| Child age                        | 9.3; 4.8                            | 8.9; 4.7                      |
| <u>Parent stressors</u>          |                                     |                               |
| Prisoner mental illness          | 49.9                                | 48.2                          |
| Prisoner substance abuse         | 60.4                                | 59.0                          |
| Parental rights terminated***    | 26.1                                | 12.1                          |
| Prior prison terms**             | 0.7; 1.0                            | 0.5; 0.8                      |
| Current offense type             |                                     |                               |
| Violent                          | 20.3                                | 20.7                          |
| Property                         | 37.7                                | 42.6                          |
| Drug**                           | 32.5                                | 23.9                          |
| Public order                     | 9.5                                 | 12.8                          |
| Sentence length (ln)***          | 3.0; 0.9                            | 3.6; 0.7                      |
| <u>Institutional barriers</u>    |                                     |                               |
| 101 miles or more**              | 34.0                                | 23.6                          |
| Minimum security*                | 78.4                                | 84.3                          |

Note: N=684. \*\*\* $\rho \leq .001$ ; \*\* $\rho \leq .01$ ; \*  $\rho \leq .05$ ; † $\rho \leq .10$ . Differences across prison visitation were tested using chi-square and t-tests.

Two child situational factors were associated with maternal prison visitation (based on prisoner reports): caregiver public assistance and prior parental involvement. First, children who were reported by their mothers to have visited were more likely to have a caregiver who received public assistance than children who were reported to have not visited (61% versus 53%). Second, children who were reported by mothers to have visited were more likely to have mothers who were more involved in their lives prior to incarceration than children who were reported by mothers to have not visited (mean factor score of 0.3 versus -0.3). Residential mobility was not significantly related to maternal prison visits.

Two race/ethnicity measures were associated with maternal prison visitation. Specifically, children who were reported by their incarcerated mothers to have visited were more likely to be African American than children who were reported to have not visited (13.1% versus 9.2%). On the other hand, children who were reported to have visited by their incarcerated mothers were less likely to be American Indian than those children who were reported to have never visited (7.5% versus 10.8%). The child's gender and age were not statistically significant.

The descriptive analyses further revealed that children who have visited their mother in prison were less likely to have a mother whose parental rights had been terminated than children who had not seen their mother since her imprisonment (26.1% versus 12.1%), according to maternal reports. Children experiencing maternal incarceration who were reported by mothers to have visited were more likely to have a mother who served fewer prison terms, and were less likely to have a mother who served

time for a drug offense. Moreover, there is a positive association between sentence length and mother-child prison visitation. Interestingly, parental substance abuse and parental mental illness were not associated with prisoner-reported visits with children.

Both institutional barriers were significantly related to mother-reported child prison visitation. Children who were reported by mothers to have visited were more likely to live closer to the correctional facility than those who did not visit. For example, nearly one-quarter (23.6%) of children who were reported by their mother to have visited lived 101 miles or more from the prison, versus 34% of children who were reported to have not visited. Similarly, children who visited, according to incarcerated mothers, were more likely to have a mother housed in a minimum security unit than those who had not visited their mother in prison (84.3% versus 78.4%).

Collectively, the type of caregiver (i.e., grandmothers) and various child situational factors, child demographics, parent stressors, and institutional barriers were significantly related to maternal prison visits. As mentioned earlier, however, residential mobility, child gender, child age, parental mental illness, and parental substance abuse were not associated with mother-child prison visits.

### **Descriptive Statistics of Paternal Prison Visitation**

Bivariate associations across father-child prison visitation for all independent variables are presented in Table 3. First, caregiver type (i.e. mothers) was significantly related to paternal-reported prison visitation. Among children who were reported by their incarcerated fathers to have visited, 88.3% had a mother caregiver compared to 68.4% of children who were reported to have never visited.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Paternal Prison Visitation.

|                                  | Child Did Not Visit<br>(N=206)<br>% | Child Visited<br>(N=94)<br>% |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <u>Caregiver type</u>            |                                     |                              |
| Mother***                        | 68.4                                | 88.3                         |
| <u>Child situational factors</u> |                                     |                              |
| Caregiver public assistance      | 59.7                                | 68.1                         |
| Residential mobility             | 0.8; 1.2                            | 0.7; 0.9                     |
| Prior parental involvement*      | -0.1; 0.9                           | 0.2; 1.0                     |
| <u>Child demographics</u>        |                                     |                              |
| Gender                           |                                     |                              |
| Boys                             | 45.6                                | 43.6                         |
| Girls                            | 54.4                                | 56.4                         |
| Race/Ethnicity                   |                                     |                              |
| White                            | 19.9                                | 21.3                         |
| Black**                          | 20.4                                | 37.2                         |
| Latino/a*                        | 49.5                                | 37.2                         |
| American Indian†                 | 10.2                                | 4.3                          |
| Child age                        | 10.2; 4.5                           | 9.9; 4.7                     |
| <u>Parent stressors</u>          |                                     |                              |
| Prisoner mental illness          | 28.2                                | 29.8                         |
| Prisoner substance abuse         | 65.0                                | 59.6                         |
| Parental rights terminated†      | 11.7                                | 5.3                          |
| Prior prison terms               | 2.2; 1.4                            | 2.1; 1.2                     |
| Current offense type             |                                     |                              |
| Violent                          | 24.8                                | 19.1                         |
| Property                         | 27.2                                | 35.1                         |
| Drug                             | 26.7                                | 29.8                         |
| Public order                     | 21.4                                | 16.0                         |
| Sentence length (ln)             | 2.7; 0.7                            | 3.1; 0.6                     |
| <u>Institutional barriers</u>    |                                     |                              |
| 101 miles or more                | 55.8                                | 54.3                         |
| Minimum security                 | 48.5                                | 42.6                         |

Note: N=300. \*\*\* $\rho \leq .001$ ; \*\* $\rho \leq .01$ ; \*  $\rho \leq .05$ ; † $\rho \leq .10$ . Differences across prison visitation were tested using chi-square and t-tests.

Secondly, prisoner-reported prior parental involvement and father-child prison visitation were positively related. Specifically, children who visited their father in prison were more likely to have a previously involved father (i.e. lived together, daily care provider, financial provider) than children who had not visited (mean factor score of 0.2 versus -0.1). In contrast, neither caregiver public assistance nor residential mobility were related to paternal reports of prison visitation between fathers and their children.

Among the paternal incarceration sample, race/ethnicity was associated with father reports of prison visits with children. For instance, children who visited their father in prison were significantly more likely to be African American, and less likely to be Latino/a or American Indian than non-visiting children. Roughly 37% of African American children were reported by their incarcerated fathers to have visited while only 20.4% of African American children had not visited. On the other hand, while 37.2% of Latino/a children were also reported by their incarcerated fathers to have visited, nearly half of Latino/a children were reported to have never visited their father in prison. Only 4.3% of American Indian children had visited their incarcerated father while 10.2% had not, according to prisoner reports. Child gender and child age were not associated with father-child prison visitation.

Not surprisingly, children who were reported to have visited their incarcerated fathers were less likely to have a father whose parental rights had been severed by a court than were children who were reported to have never visited (5.3% versus 11.7%). Descriptively, parental rights termination was the sole parental stressor associated with father-reported child prison visitation, as prisoner mental illness, prisoner substance

abuse, prior prison terms, current offense type and sentence length were not statistically significant.

Interestingly, neither institutional barrier measure was significantly related to paternal-reported prison visitation at the bivariate level. In other words, geographic distance was not associated with paternal prison visits. The same is also true for prison security level.

Collectively, only four factors were correlated with prisoner-reports of paternal prison visitation. These factors included caregiver type (i.e. mothers), prior parental involvement, race/ethnicity (i.e. African American, Latino/a, American Indian) and termination of parental rights. In fact, most child situational factors, parent stressors, both institutional barriers, child gender and child age were unrelated to father-child prison visits at the bivariate level.

### **Logistic Regression Results: Maternal Incarceration**

The logistic regression results for caregiver type on the likelihood of parental prison visitation are presented in Table 4. In the maternal model, children with grandmother caregivers were significantly more likely to be reported by their incarcerated mothers to have visited than were children in the care of other guardians (e.g., fathers, other relatives, non-relatives, state custody), net of relevant controls. More specifically, children who lived with grandmothers had an increased odds of maternal visitation by a factor of 1.894 ( $\exp[0.638]$ ). This finding confirms my expectation that caregiver type is a key explanatory variable for maternal-reported prison visitation.



Several child situational factors also predicted the likelihood of mother-child prison visitation. For instance, children were 1.927 times ( $\exp[0.656]$ ) more likely to have visited a mother in prison who was previously more involved in their lives—in terms of living together, providing daily care and financial support—than children whose mothers were previously less involved. Alternatively, while caregiver public assistance was associated with maternal prison visits at the bivariate level, this relationship did not hold in the multivariate model. Residential mobility was also statistically insignificant in this model.

Furthermore, child demographics did not predict the likelihood of maternal-reported prison visitation. Although race/ethnicity (i.e. African American, American Indian) was related to mother-child prison visits in descriptive analyses ( $\rho \leq .10$ ), when controlling for other relevant factors in the multivariate model, race/ethnicity was not a significant predictor of the respective outcome. Child age and child gender were also unrelated to maternal prison visits.

Three parent stressors predicted whether children visited their mother in prison, according to maternal reports. These factors included parental rights termination, type of current offense and sentence length. For instance, children were 0.293 ( $\exp[-1.226]$ ) times less likely to visit their incarcerated mother if her parental rights had been terminated than children whose mothers still maintained rights to their children. With respect to type of current offense, maternal children were 0.410 ( $\exp[-0.890]$ ) times less likely to be reported by mothers to have visited if their mother was in prison for a violent crime and 0.545( $\exp[-0.367]$ ) times less likely to be reported to have visited if their

mother was incarcerated for a drug offense ( $p \leq .10$ ) than a property crime. Moreover, as sentence length increased, the odds of mother-child visitation increased by a factor of 3.917 ( $\exp[1.367]$ ). Parental mental illness, parental substance abuse and prior prison terms were not significantly associated with the likelihood of maternal-reported prison visitation.

Both institutional barriers predicted the likelihood of mother-child prison visits. Specifically, children who lived 101 miles or more from their mother's correctional institution were 0.498 ( $\exp[-0.696]$ ) times less likely to be reported by mothers to have visited than children who lived closer. Additionally, children whose mothers were housed in a minimum security unit had greater odds of visiting than children whose mothers were confined in medium, close or maximum security units by a factor of 2.533 ( $\exp[0.930]$ ).

Thus, the results of the maternal logistic regression model show the important role grandmothers play in the facilitation of mother-child prison visitation. Further, results underscore the significance of prior parental involvement, parental rights termination, type of offense, sentence length and institutional barriers (i.e., geographic distance, prisoner security level) on whether or not children were reported by incarcerated mothers to have visited during her confinement.

Table 4. Logistic Regression Results: Caregiver Type on the Likelihood of Parent-Child Visitation.

|                                  | <u>Maternal Model</u> |       |       | <u>Paternal Model</u> |       |       |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-------|-------|-----------------------|-------|-------|
|                                  | <i>b</i>              | S.E.  | Odds  | <i>b</i>              | S.E.  | Odds  |
| <u>Independent Variables</u>     |                       |       |       |                       |       |       |
| <u>Caregiver type</u>            |                       |       |       |                       |       |       |
| Mother                           | ---                   | ---   | ---   | 1.268**               | 0.417 | 3.554 |
| Grandmother                      | 0.638*                | 0.287 | 1.894 | ---                   | ---   | ---   |
| <u>Child situational factors</u> |                       |       |       |                       |       |       |
| Caregiver public assistance      | 0.345                 | 0.309 | 1.412 | 0.407                 | 0.303 | 1.502 |
| Residential mobility             | -0.169                | 0.154 | 0.844 | -0.152                | 0.135 | 0.859 |
| Prior parental involvement       | 0.656***              | 0.141 | 1.927 | 0.516***              | 0.158 | 1.676 |
| <u>Child demographics</u>        |                       |       |       |                       |       |       |
| <u>Gender</u>                    |                       |       |       |                       |       |       |
| Girls                            | -0.058                | 0.195 | 0.944 | -0.174                | 0.276 | 0.840 |
| <u>Race/Ethnicity</u>            |                       |       |       |                       |       |       |
| White                            | 0.116                 | 0.440 | 1.123 | -0.129                | 0.424 | 0.879 |
| Latino/a                         | -0.186                | 0.437 | 0.830 | -0.575†               | 0.338 | 0.563 |
| American Indian                  | -0.043                | 0.584 | 0.958 | -1.517*               | 0.646 | 0.219 |
| Child age                        | -0.291                | 0.024 | 0.971 | 0.008                 | 0.032 | 1.001 |

Table 4. Logistic Regression Results: Caregiver Type on the Likelihood of Parent-Child Visitation (continued).

|                               | <u>Maternal Model</u> |               | <u>Paternal Model</u> |              |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|-----------------------|--------------|
|                               | <i>b</i>              | S.E.          | <i>b</i>              | S.E.         |
| <u>Parent stressors</u>       |                       |               |                       |              |
| Prisoner mental illness       | 0.164                 | 0.303         | -0.165                | 0.343        |
| Prisoner substance abuse      | -0.069                | 0.335         | -0.432                | 0.316        |
| Parental rights terminated    | -1.226**              | 0.415         | -0.181                | 0.565        |
| Prior prison terms            | -0.219                | 0.162         | 0.019                 | 0.122        |
| <u>Current offense type</u>   |                       |               |                       |              |
| Violent                       | -0.890*               | 0.167         | -0.367                | 0.412        |
| Drug                          | -0.367†               | 0.199         | -0.017                | 0.355        |
| Public order                  | 0.249                 | 0.448         | -0.379                | 0.457        |
| Sentence length (ln)          | 1.367***              | 0.206         | 0.249                 | 0.230        |
| <u>Institutional barriers</u> |                       |               |                       |              |
| 101 miles or more             | -0.696*               | 0.307         | 0.105                 | 0.274        |
| Minimum security              | 0.930*                | 0.407         | -0.207                | 0.288        |
| Constant                      | -4.783                | 0.958         | -1.829*               | 0.996        |
| -2 Log Likelihood             |                       | -345.256      |                       | -164.122     |
| $\chi^2$ ; df                 |                       | 100.88***; 19 |                       | 42.67***; 19 |
| R <sup>2</sup>                |                       | 0.26          |                       | 0.12         |
| N =                           |                       | 684           |                       | 300          |

Note. \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \* $p \leq .05$ ; † $p \leq .10$ . Unstandardized coefficients, odds ratios, and clustered robust standard errors are reported. Boys, blacks and property offenses are reference categories.

### **Logistic Regression Results: Paternal Incarceration**

The logistic regression results for the likelihood of paternal prison visitation are also presented in Table 4. In line with my hypothesis, caregiver type is significantly related to whether or not a child visits his or her father in prison, based on father reports. Specifically, children with mother caregivers were 3.554 times (exp [1.268]) more likely to have been reported to have visited by incarcerated fathers than children with other caregivers (e.g., other relatives, non-relatives and state custody), after controlling for child situational factors, child demographics, parent stressors, and institutional barriers.

Prior parental involvement was also a significant predictor of paternal-reported prison visitation. Children whose fathers were more involved in their lives before imprisonment were 1.676 times (exp [0.516]) more likely to have visited their father in prison than children whose fathers were less involved with respect to living together, daily care and financial support pre-incarceration. No other child situational factors (e.g., caregiver public assistance, residential mobility) significantly affected whether children were reported by fathers to have visited their father in prison.

In terms of child demographics, race/ethnicity influenced the probability of father-child prison visitation. Specifically, Latino/a children were 0.563 times (exp[-0.575]) less likely to have visited their imprisoned father than were African American children ( $p \leq .10$ ). Likewise, American Indian children were less likely to have visited their father than were their African American counterparts by a factor of 0.219 (exp[-1.517]), based on paternal reports. In contrast, other child demographics such as age and gender were not significant predictors of paternal prison visitation.

It is important to note that no parent stressors or institutional barriers were statistically significant predictors of father-reported child prison visits. For example, prisoner mental illness, prisoner substance abuse, parental rights termination, prior prison terms, current offense type and sentence length were not associated with whether or not children were reported to have visited their imprisoned fathers. While parental rights termination was correlated with paternal prison visits at the bivariate level, this relationship did not hold in the multivariate model. Additionally, neither geographic distance (i.e. 101 miles or more) nor prison security level affected the probability of father-reported prison visitation.

Together, only three variables accounted for whether or not a child visited his or her father in prison: caregiver type (i.e. mothers), prior parental involvement, and race/ethnicity. In line with expectations, mothers, in fact, do serve as the key facilitator of father-reported child contact during paternal imprisonment. Also as expected, fathers who were more involved with their children before confinement were more likely to report having been visited by their children in prison. And lastly, racial and ethnic differences also affected the likelihood of paternal visitation, with Latino/as and American Indians less likely to have been reported by fathers to have visited than African Americans.

## Chapter 5

### Findings for Child Responses to Prison Visitation

#### Introduction

The second aim of this dissertation was to examine how children responded emotionally and behaviorally to visitation with an incarcerated parent, as perceived by caregivers. To reiterate, I qualitatively explored the following research questions among a purposive sample of 40 children who were reported by their primary caregiver to have visited their incarcerated mother or father in prison at least once:

1. What role do “visitation paradox” factors (i.e., parental attachment, secondary prisonization) play in how children respond emotionally and behaviorally to parental prison visitation, as perceived by caregivers?
2. How do pre-incarceration life circumstances (e.g., stressors) influence children’s emotional and behavioral responses to prison visitation, as perceived by caregivers?
3. How does age affect children’s responses to parental prison visitation?

As identified by their caregivers, these children are racially and ethnically diverse in that 45% are Latino/a, 27.5% are African American, 17.5% are White and 10% are American Indian. There are a slightly higher number of boys than girls in this sample (55% versus 45%). Given the purposive sampling strategy that randomly identified 10 children across each of four key age groups (i.e., preschool, school age, early adolescence, late adolescence), the mean child age was 10.3 years. Slightly more than half of these children were experiencing the incarceration of a mother and 45% were experiencing the incarceration of a father. Parents of these 40 children were serving average prison terms of just over three years (37.9 months). Half of the children resided

with a grandparent, 42.5% lived with a parent and 7.5% of children were cared for by another relative (i.e., aunt, cousin).

Results revealed that nearly two-thirds of children reacted negatively to parental prison visitation (65%; n=26) while only 35% demonstrated positive responses (n=14). Among the 65% of children who responded negatively, caregivers characterized children's reactions as largely emotional, including expressions of fear, anger, and anxiety. Caregivers indicated that children would cry excessively, experience emotional outbursts and exhibit depressive symptoms (e.g., withdrawn). Other responses to visits included poor attitude, acting out, and developmental regression (e.g., acting "younger" than age) while interacting with the incarcerated parent.

Alternatively, for 35% of these children, visiting an imprisoned mother or father generated positive responses. In these cases, caregivers described children as excited, having an improved attitude, and heightened spirits. Caregivers also noted that these children were better behaved during visits than at home in terms of following rules, listening, and being engaged. Even more, the promise of future visitation was used as an incentive for good behavior by some caregivers as many children looked forward to visits with their parent in that it was an opportunity to communicate and bond.

Two key themes emerged from thematic content analyses of caregiver accounts to explain child responses to visitation: (1) Institutional context (e.g., secondary prisonization); and (2) parental attachment. These themes reflect the importance of context but also underscore the complexities inherent in these parent-child dynamics, consistent with much of Christian's prior work on prison visitation and familial/romantic



relationships (Christian, 2005; Christian & Kennedy; 2011; Christian, Mellow & Thomas, 2006).

With respect to my first research question, these findings lend support to Arditti's (2012) theoretical concept of the "visitation paradox" in that both penal environmental conditions and parental attachment shaped how children responded to visits with an incarcerated mother or father. The institutional context, however, surfaced as the dominant theme. First, the punitive nature of correctional settings often extends to family members in the context of visitation. Intrusive search procedures, poor treatment by correctional staff, and visiting rooms that are not conducive to family interaction meant that many children had great difficulty coping with exposure to the prison environment. This finding is in line with Comfort's (2008) work and others (see Christian, 2005; Swanson et al., 2013) that suggest that the carceral setting has transformative power for visitors who endure it.

Second, levels of parental attachment impacted many children's responses to interaction with their mother or father in the visiting room. For some children, parental attachments were highly strained in light of their parent's limited prior involvement—as revealed in caregiver interviews—which was often a result of criminal activity, substance abuse, or an unwillingness or inability to parent, consistent with prior research (Hanlon et al., 2007; Owen, 1998; Roy & Dyson, 2005). As a result, the visitation encounter often sparked negative responses in these children given such highly complex family dynamics.

With respect to my second research question, there was no direct support for pre-incarceration life circumstances impacting the way in which children responded to

interaction with their parent during prison visitation. Stated differently, caregivers did not attribute children's reactions to visits to specific challenges endured by children before the parent's imprisonment. Rather, caregivers discussed children's responses in the context of the institution or parental attachment and not as linked to a particular pre-incarceration event—even when children had been exposed to various parental stressors in the past.

Interestingly and somewhat surprisingly, child reactions to parental prison visits did not vary by age, as explored in the third and final research question. Of course, there were some age differences in the manner by which children expressed their emotions regarding visitation across developmental stages, but an age pattern did not emerge with respect to whether children's responses were positive or negative. For example, an emotional reaction from a two-year-old might include throwing himself/herself on the floor and crying excessively, whereas an emotional reaction from a 16-year-old might consist of yelling angrily at the parent. In both cases, while these two children expressed their reactions differently, both responded negatively to the visit encounter. As such, the lack of support for child age in how children react to parental prison visits appears to be attributed to the power of the institutional context and levels of parental attachment, which may have trumped any potential age-graded effects.

In the following, I illustrate the nuances of my findings by detailing the themes inherent in the “visitation paradox” that accounted for children's reactions to visitation with a mother or father in prison.

## “Visitation Paradox”: Institutional Context

Among the 40 children included in the present analysis, the institutional context accounted for 73% (n=29) of child responses to parental prison visitation. Of the 29 children for whom institutional context was key, 69% (n=20) were reported by caregivers to have demonstrated negative responses. In contrast, 31% (n=9) of these children responded positively to visitation, as indicated by their primary caregiver.

I will first begin by describing the way in which the penal environment sparked negative child responses, as illustrated by Shawna’s<sup>13</sup> experience—a 17-year-old African American adolescent whose father was incarcerated—as depicted by her mother:

First of all, it was a long, tiring drive. It’s always a long drive wherever he’s at. And then we get there, we have to sit there and we have to get searched. It’s an uncomfortable feeling for me so I know it’s uncomfortable for the kids so I said we’re not going to keep going through this. And you have to sit like we can’t really touch, no kissing. It’s hugging only at the end. And then you can’t take food or anything. They have machines like you can get food from the machines and that’s it...[my daughter] does a lot of crying. Other times she’s just like angry. She’s real mean sometimes.

In this case, the caregiver described how the visitation process itself (e.g., distance to the prison, wait times, search procedures) and lack of family-friendly visitation rooms prompted negative reactions in her daughter to such a degree that she decided that the family will not visit again. Similarly, Josh—a 15-year-old White youth whose father is in prison—is reported to have expressed negative emotions after his interaction with the carceral visitation setting. Josh’s mother articulated how taxing and intrusive the experience was:

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<sup>13</sup> Pseudonyms are used for confidentiality purposes.

It was stressful because you had to make sure you had the right clothes on and the guard at the gate might think what you had on was appropriate but when you got back to the building, that guard might not think your shirt was appropriate. And then of course you get sniffed by the dog. You have to empty your pockets and you can't take this in and you have to make sure that your money is in a clear baggie, just, really stressful. And even when you got in, it was just stressful. And there wasn't a whole lot for my son to do when we were up there visiting, you know. It was hard on him. His attitude was really pretty lousy when he came out of the prison. It was hard on both of us. I think it was probably about all we could both handle.

One Latino father explained how unfriendly staff coupled with strict security protocols instilled fear and uncertainty into his five-year-old son Miguel:

They treat people really bad down there. They work with prisoners so they treat visitors like prisoners too. They don't realize we are their family and we don't have problems, the prisoners have the problems. They don't respect visitors. It's a hard time to take your shoes off, walk without shoes, go through a metal detector. Or, we don't have enough change to buy sodas or the chocolate donuts. [My son] is always yelling for me. [My son] feels it. It's something I can't hide.

Ray—a two-year-old American Indian boy—had a strong emotional reaction to witnessing his incarcerated mother getting searched by correctional staff as he stood behind the barred gate. Ray's father recounted his young son's experience:

[His mom] was at the gate because after you see the prisoners, they put them behind the fence. You can see the prisoners from here and they're over there until they get strip-searched. So, [my son] would sit down at the fence like this, "Mama, mama". [My son] was crying and I had to pick him up and he would say, "I wanna stay in jail with my mom".

As illustrated by the experiences of Shawna, Josh, Miguel and Ray as told by their caregivers, navigating visitation processes and procedures is stressful and intimidating. Other caregivers reflected on the aftermath of interacting with the penal environment for children who visited an incarcerated parent. For instance, the grandmother of Adrian—a nine-year-old Latino whose mother is in prison—explained how her grandson was

negatively affected emotionally and behaviorally by the visitation experience in which the effects lingered beyond visiting day:

The thing about it is that if we do see her, like on a Sunday—most of the time it's Sunday—the next day, [Adrian] tends to act up. To me, it's better to not have too much contact because there's a time lapse in here where I want these kids to get their emotions together.

Likewise, the caregiver of a six-year-old African American girl depicted how his young cousin Danica had great difficulty coping with visiting her father in a correctional institution. Danica's emotional outbursts during visits lasted well after the family arrived home where her caregiver attempted to console her while simultaneously struggling with his own discomfort over having exposed her to the punitive carceral environment:

She literally just screams and goes crazy. I'm just like, 'Oh, I hate doing this. I don't like doing this at all.' Once we get back to the house, we sit down, she'll cry for a little bit and I tell her it's okay, it won't be much longer. She'll talk to me and be like, 'How many more times do we have to go see him like that?' and 'I don't want to keep going to see him like that.'

As mentioned earlier, the institutional context did not elicit negative responses in all children. In 31% of these cases the institutional context positively shaped children's reactions to parental prison visitation. For instance, caregivers explained how visiting rooms in some correctional units were family-friendly, which put children at ease in interacting with their parent. The grandmother of Lacey, an 11-year-old White girl, explained how carceral settings that were family-sensitive prompted positive responses from her granddaughter:

If you can make this normal, they do, [correctional officials] really try to make it normal, there are games to play, there are vending machines, and there is junk food. Once the inmate gets moved up for their behavior, you can bring food from home, they have food visit days. At first [Lacey] used to cry every visit; now she looks forward to it.

Another caregiver described how the ability to have face-to-face contact in which the parent and child can show affection to one another resulted in a positive experience for the child. This caregiver compared the institutional context of jail visitation to that of prison visitation for her grandson Connor—a two-year-old White toddler—whose mother was incarcerated:

You are not allowed to even touch at the jail and they are shackled to a table. You know, it is just a short visit with a lot of other people [at the jail] but the visit to the prison is good. [My grandson] blows her kisses and he welcomes her so warmly.

For most of these cases where the institutional context was linked to positive child reactions, the children were visiting a parent in a minimum-security unit<sup>14</sup>. As a result, visiting protocols and search procedures were less intrusive and the contact in the visitation rooms were less regulated, thereby promoting a more comfortable environment for families to interact. For Keisha, a four-year-old African American preschooler, entering the penal environment for visitation was “easy” given her mother’s minimum-security classification, according to her grandmother:

Oh, [my granddaughter] is fine. She is on a minimum yard now, so it is much easier, you know, you don’t have to go through all the mess that you did when she was on a medium or max yard. Now, you just fill out the paperwork, walk through the gate, hand them your ID and just go right in there and see her. Much easier. Now, [my granddaughter] would like to see her more.

Considered together, the present findings are consistent with prior work (Arditti, 2012; Comfort, 2008; Christian, 2005). Children who encountered burdensome visitation

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that an inmate’s security level in ADC is not solely based on type of offense committed, but rather is made up of a variety of risk scores involving institutional, community, mental health, education, substance abuse and other factors. As such, minimum security inmates are not a homogenous group comprised of one offender type.

processes and security protocols overwhelmingly responded negatively to prison visitation with an imprisoned parent. Correctional officers were often described as unwelcoming, as were the visitation rooms themselves. The inherently intimidating nature of the prison environment often induced fear into children as they navigated through metal detectors, drug-sniffing dogs and loud, slamming metal gates. The punitive nature of this environment prompted many caregivers to question whether or not visitation was conducive to the child's well-being. Indeed, some caregivers even stated that the child's first visit would be their last. Whether or not caregivers change their minds about visitation later on, though, is unknown. On the other hand, when correctional units were welcoming and family-friendly, utilized less invasive search procedures and provided opportunities for families to connect (e.g., food visits), children tended to respond positively to the visit encounter. Still, the major takeaway from these findings is that the majority of children were often uncomfortable in, and apprehensive of, the correctional institution to which they were exposed, thereby prompting negative responses.

### **“Visitation Paradox”: Parental Attachment**

For nearly half (45%; n=18) of all children in the sample, parental attachment was a driving force in their responses to prison visitation with an incarcerated parent. Among these 18 children, 56% (n=10) were characterized by caregivers as having strained parental attachments in which they would respond negatively to visits. In contrast, 44% (n=8) of these 18 children were reported to have reacted positively to visitation with their

incarcerated mother or father as caregivers in these cases attributed their responses to strong parental attachments.

I begin by describing cases in which caregivers attributed children's negative reactions to parental prison visitation to low levels of parental attachment. Nathan—a three-year-old American Indian boy—whose mother has been sporadically involved in his life given her struggle with methamphetamine, expressed negative emotions towards her during his visit. Despite his young age, Nathan's grandmother described how his feelings of abandonment manifested during visitation:

I noticed that he's not loving with her. It reminds of, like, 'okay that's enough'. She's grabbing him and she's kissing him. He pushes back at her. I don't know if he's too young to know this, but maybe he's protecting himself because he knows the drill. I don't know how far back he remembers but he knows that she hasn't been in his life so I'm thinking that he doesn't want to get hurt. He doesn't know how long this is going to last until she disappears again. Then I start seeing him getting depressed.

In a similar vein, Carrie—a 15-year-old White youth—was placed with her grandmother by the state due to neglect stemming from her mother's lengthy substance abuse and mental health history. Given this, Carrie's relationship with her mother has become highly strained. Carrie often lashes out at her mother during prison visitation. Her grandmother described her adverse reactions to visits:

There has been times when Carrie's anger has surfaced, and she'll yell and scream and get out her emotions. She says terrible things to her mother for leaving her. She'll carry on. Most of the time, up at the prison, if [my granddaughter] just looks angry they give her a warning [because she will get kicked out]

Other children were reported by caregivers to respond to prison visitation with both internalized and externalized behavior, as in the case of Alexis—a 10-year-old Latina who has been in the care of her grandparents for most of her life given her mother's



ongoing struggle with addiction. Alexis' grandmother explained how these strained parental attachments resulted in miscommunication during visitation. Also noted by her grandmother, Alexis exhibited withdrawn behavior and had the tendency to "act out" upon interacting one-on-one with her incarcerated mother. Alexis' grandmother describes these responses:

She's very quiet. That's kind of scary sometimes, you know. Yeah, [Alexis] is real quiet. I mean, she holds her emotions in, you know. I don't know what they say after they go outside and we don't ask them. When [Alexis] starts getting fidgety or starts acting up, we ask her what happened or what was said or what answer she didn't like [from her mom].

On the other hand, some children were noted to developmentally regress in response to prison visits with their incarcerated parent. In these cases, maternal or paternal attachments were strained often due to sporadic prior parental involvement. In these cases, the child appeared to revert to "baby-like" behavior in an attempt to re-bond with his or her parent. Caregivers of these children characterized such behavior negatively and as deeply concerning. For instance, the aunt of a 15-year-old White youth named James explained the pattern of developmental regression she witnessed during James' visits with his incarcerated mother:

It's just a completely inappropriate relationship. She's always rubbing his back and he was just completely different than how he normally is the six years he lived with us. Like giggly and more immature, because he's very mature for his age, even at nine, he always was. He is very smart. He turned fifteen last October but he was acting shy, like a little kid, as if he was five or something. His behavior at visit is so bizarre.

Finally, in other cases, the visitation experience itself reinforces the parent's inconsistent presence in the child's life, thereby sparking adverse emotional responses. For these children, the interaction with their parent during a visit is positive; once the visitation

hours are over, however, previous feelings of abandonment may be triggered. For seven-year-old Lorena—a Latina experiencing paternal incarceration—her father’s immersion into gang life meant he spent most of his time on the streets and away from home before his incarceration. Lorena’s father had lived in the grandmother’s home but his later sporadic presence in her life strained her previously strong parental attachments. In consideration of these dynamics, Lorena’s grandmother explained her granddaughter’s emotional reactions to prison visits with her father:

It was horrible. And that’s why I’m glad I didn’t take them that often because that was more hurtful than [my granddaughter] not seeing him. Dealing with her on the way back home, she would cry herself to sleep.

Alternatively, some children were highly attached to their imprisoned mother or father. As previously mentioned, 44% (n=8) of children whose reactions to visitation were attributed to parental attachment were described by caregivers as responding positively to the visit encounter. For instance, Stacey—a 13-year-old White youth—who was described by her caregiver as having a strong relationship with her father before his incarceration, responded well to visitation:

Well, we always have a good visit when we go. We had a food visit and [Stacey] liked that. We found out what he’d like to eat and took it down but I wish he was closer to see him more often because the kids need that. They have a good relationship and it’s always a good visit. She can’t wait to go see him, she gets so excited.

Another caregiver of a 13-year-old African American boy explained how visiting a parent to whom a child is highly attached is less “traumatic” than visiting a parent who has a strained relationship with the child:

He loves his dad. And he's like, 'I'll be glad when dad gets out'. It's not the same as with his mother because you can see the difference from when she has a visit and doesn't come back the next day. You can see the trauma that he goes through from seeing her versus seeing his dad. He's like, 'dad's getting out soon, you know, we're going to go and take pictures on this day'. It's not as much trauma because [dad] has been there more than [mom] has been there.

For some families experiencing paternal incarceration, children met their fathers for the first time in the prison visitation room. These caregivers described visitation as an overall positive experience for the children in that the child finally can have a “relationship with their dad”. For instance, Hannah—a seven-year-old White girl—was introduced to her father in prison as a toddler, as her mother was pregnant when he was first incarcerated. Hannah's mother discussed her adjustment to the penal environment while developing parental attachments at the same time:

At first, she was really standoffish. When she was really little it was weird for her, I think, she didn't really understand, but as she got bigger, I think she was okay with visiting almost because she didn't know any different and I was really big on talking about him a lot. I showed her pictures of him a lot and I made sure that she knew who he was and that he loved her, even if he did make a mistake. When he was in Tucson, we got to visit every weekend. So, she's fine now.

Despite the powerful influence of institutional context on how children responded to parental visitation, levels of parental attachments cannot be ignored (Poehlmann et al., 2008). Many of these parents' relationships with their children are highly complex and tumultuous given the multitude of challenges endured by these vulnerable family systems (Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Turanovic et al., 2012). As such, the visit encounter itself often reignited many unresolved prior conflicts, which frequently resulted in negative emotional and behavioral child responses. Still, for some children high levels of parental attachment shielded them from a negative visitation experience in that these children

were able to reconnect and bond with their imprisoned parent and know that their parent is safe. Unfortunately, however, many of these children's parental attachments were strained, thereby provoking negative reactions to prison visits with incarcerated mothers and fathers among the majority of children.

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, 65% (n=26) of the 40 children in the sample demonstrated negative emotional and behavioral responses to prison visitation with an incarcerated parent. Typical responses included emotional outbursts, withdrawn behavior, anger, anxiety and developmental regression. On the other hand, caregivers cited positive reactions to parental prison visitation for only 35% of children. Frequent responses included excitement and improved behavior and attitudes. In line with prior studies (Christian, 2005; Casey-Acevedo et al., 2004) and consistent with Arditti's (2012) theoretical notion of the visitation paradox, thematic content analyses uncovered institutional contextual factors and levels of parental attachments prompted child responses. Direct support was not found for pre-incarceration stressors or child age, as explored in research questions two and three.

The majority of children's reactions to parental prison visitation were influenced by the institutional context (73%; n=29). Grounded in a secondary prisonization framework, correctional environments that were unwelcoming to visitors and employed invasive policies and procedures for visitors resulted in adverse emotional and behavioral responses in children (Arditti, 2003; 2005; 2012; Comfort, 2008; Christian, 2005). In contrast, children tended to respond more positively when correctional units were less

restrictive and family-friendly, which was often the case in minimum security units as visitors to these units were able to have a greater degree of interpersonal contact, were subjected to fewer search protocols and were provided with special opportunities to connect and interact with the incarcerated parent (e.g., food visit day). Unfortunately, though, caregivers cited such climates far less frequently.

Additionally, parental attachments were found to shape reactions to prison visitation among 45% (n=18) of children. As expected from an attachment perspective (Bowlby, 1969; 1973), children with weak maternal or paternal attachments often responded negatively to their interaction with their parent during visitation—which was the case for the vast majority of these children. Sadly, this finding likely stems from the complicated dynamics present in many of these vulnerable family systems (Tasca et al., 2011; Turanovic et al., 2012). Alternatively, strong parental attachments resulted in positive responses to visits for some children. These families were able to maintain relationships through prison visitation as visits provided an important context for bonding and connection (Poehlmann, 2005b; Poehlmann et al., 2008). For other children, the positive visitation experience stemmed from meeting their father for the first time. In these instances, parental relationships were often free from any pre-incarceration baggage that strained many other prisoners' relationships with their children (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Roy & Dyson, 2005).

In short, while the institutional context was the most influential in determining emotional and behavioral responses of children who visit an imprisoned parent, parental attachments were undoubtedly important as well. It is important to note that visitation

paradox factors are very much intertwined as neither contextual factors nor parental attachment occur in isolation. Even more, nearly 18% of caregivers attributed children's responses to parental prison visitation to both contextual factors and levels of attachment.

The most positive child reactions were found in children visiting in child-sensitive environments with high levels of parental attachment, as perceived by caregivers. Alternatively, the most negative child responses were linked by caregivers to visiting in stressful settings and interacting with parents in which attachments were greatly strained. When the institutional context was described by caregivers as highly negative for children, this tended to trump the influence of parental attachment in children's perceived responses. In contrast, when the institutional context was positive or at a minimum, "neutral", relationship dynamics between prisoners and children tended to be raised more often by caregivers in their discussions of child reactions to visitation. Together, these findings further underscore the complexities posed by imprisonment for prisoners, caregivers and children.

## Chapter 6

### Discussion and Conclusion

This dissertation set out to accomplish two main research objectives. First, I investigated the effect of caregiver type (i.e. mothers, grandmothers) on the likelihood of maternal and paternal prison visits. Second, I explored the emotional and behavioral responses of children who visited an incarcerated parent, relying upon and extending Arditti's (2012) theoretical concept of the visitation paradox. This research contributes to the broader collateral consequences of incarceration literature by focusing on vulnerable family systems experiencing incarceration, by assessing the circumstances by which they connect, and the implications of such connections for remaining minor children. After all, children's interaction with the penal system is an important—yet understudied—collateral consequence of mass imprisonment.

In the following, I discuss key findings from analyses and the theoretical and empirical contributions of the current research. Then, I describe the limitations of this study, directions for future research and outline the implications of these findings for correctional policy and practice. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a discussion on the broader takeaways from this research regarding mass incarceration and what it means for families.

## **The Influence of Caregiver Type on Prison Visitation**

**Maternal incarceration.** As results confirmed, caregiver type was a key explanatory factor in the likelihood of mother-reported child prison visits (chapter 4). Among maternal incarceration cases, children in the care of a grandmother were more likely to be reported to have visited their mother in prison than children residing with other caregiver types (i.e. fathers, other relatives, non-relatives, state custody). Below I detail possible reasons why this is the case, drawing upon existing theoretical and empirical work.

Although not empirically tested, some potential explanations for why grandmothers are the most probable facilitators of maternal prison visits are likely grounded in their immense caregiving burdens and unique bonds with these prisoners that are distinct from other caregiver types (Cecil et al., 2008; Gleeson et al., 2009; Roy & Dyson, 2005). These aging, overwhelmed, and under resourced grandmothers—who have often been caring for these children for most of their lives—have been shown to be uniquely vested in these mothers assuming their parental obligations post-release (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Denby, 2012; Hanlon et al., 2007). These mothers are most often their own daughters to whom they are strongly attached and have complicated relationships (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Gleeson et al., 2009; Hanlon et al., 2007). Thus, I contend that the finding that grandmothers were more likely to take children to visit their imprisoned mothers than were other caregivers is potentially a result of grandmothers’ “idealized expectations” of these women. This likely stems from their own need for reprieve, belief



that their daughters will change, and desire for resumed mother-child relationships (Arditti, 2012; Denby, 2012; Hanlon et al., 2007; Roy & Dyson, 2005).

A potential explanation for why other caregivers (i.e. fathers, other relatives, non-relatives, state) were found to be less likely to facilitate mother-reported child prison visits than were grandmothers might be rooted in the theoretical construct of the “good mother”. This is based upon widely held stereotypes about acceptable roles women are to play in family life (Arditti, 2012). Indeed, societal assumptions surrounding mothering depict women as self-sacrificing, benevolent and pure. Fitting the typecast of the “crack mom” is in direct violation of the “good mother” role that women are expected to fulfill (Arditti, 2012; Zatz, 2000).

Subsequently, fathers, other relatives and non-relatives may be less likely to facilitate prison visits in an effort to protect children from their “bad” mother while also punishing the woman for violating these societal norms. For children in the care of the state, similar assumptions by courts and legislatures of these women as “unfit” mothers are often made sometimes resulting in termination of parental rights (Lenox, 2011; Kruttschnitt, 2011). Of course, grandmothers are not immune from such societal values involving mothering; however, in light of prior work, I posit that grandmothers have a vested interest in maintaining mother-child connections via prison visitation given their own set of needs and the fact that these incarcerated parents are, after all, usually their daughters (Cecil et al., 2008; Hanlon et al., 2007).

Several other child situational factors, parent stressors, and institutional barriers also influenced whether children were reported by incarcerated mothers to have visited

their mother in prison. With respect to child situational factors, prior parental involvement was found to be significantly associated with the likelihood of maternal-reported prison visits. Specifically, children whose mothers were more involved in their daily lives (i.e. living together, providing daily care, financial support) were more likely to be reported to have visited their mothers than children whose mothers were less involved. This finding is consistent with prior work that suggests that children who are strongly bonded with their mother before her imprisonment are more likely to visit her in prison, considering that visitation is a key opportunity to maintain parental bonds during incarceration (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002; Poehlmann, 2003; Poehlmann, 2005b).

Parent stressors that affected the likelihood of maternal prison visits included parental rights termination, offense type, and sentence length. Consistent with prior work, children were less likely to visit a mother whose parental rights had been terminated by a court than children whose mothers still had their rights to their children, according to maternal reports (Kruttschnitt, 2011). In these cases, a court order may have been issued that prohibited the mother from having contact with her children. Although some caregivers may choose to violate the judge's order—as ADC would be unaware of this family court order—these instances are likely the exception and not the rule.

In other instances when maternal rights were severed, the child may have been the victim in their mother's case that led to her incarceration. In this case, Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC) policy would not permit the child—the victim—to visit his or her mother in prison. Given that all visitors must undergo an approval process prior to visiting, the screening of potential victims would be conducted during this initial

approval review. It is important to reiterate, however, that a family court-order prohibiting parent-child contact would be unknown to ADC if the child was not the victim in the mother's offense in which she was convicted. Parental rights termination, then, in some cases might be thought of as an institutional barrier as well as a parent stressor in the context of prison visitation.

In addition, children whose mothers were violent offenders were less likely to be reported by mothers to have visited than were children whose mothers were property offenders—consistent with previous research (Fuller, 1993). It could be the case that the child was the victim of the violent offense; or the child's caregiver may be apprehensive about the mother's violent history and therefore restrict contact. An alternate explanation could be that mothers convicted of violent crimes are housed in higher security units that make visitation more difficult for caregivers and children to navigate. It is important to note that within the Arizona Department of Corrections, violent offenders can be housed in medium, close or maximum-security units—determined by classification scores based on numerous factors. Violent offenders are prohibited from being housed in minimum-security units, however.

Likewise, children whose mothers were drug offenders were also less likely to be reported to have visited than were children whose mothers were property offenders. This finding is expected in light of prior work that shows the strain that maternal drug use can have on family ties (Greene et al., 2000; Owen, 1998; Phillips et al., 2006). Indeed, it may be that the mother's prior drug use resulted in neglectful treatment of the child

and/or weakened familial bonds to such a degree that prison visitation is undesired by children and/or caregivers.

In line with prior research, sentence length also affected the likelihood of maternal-reported prison visitation, although the direction of that relationship has varied across studies (Bales & Mears, 2008; Fuller, 1993). In the current analyses, it was found that as prison sentences increased in length, the likelihood of maternal prison visitation also increased. This finding is likely a result of families' attempts at maintaining parental attachments in light of a mother's extended absence from her children. In other words, there may be concerns among family members in cases where a mother is serving a lengthy imprisonment term that her children will "forget" her, thus visitation may be more likely in these instances.

Finally, two institutional barriers influenced the probability of maternal prison visits: geographic distance and prisoner security level. Consistent with previous research, children who resided within 101 miles from the sole female correctional facility in Arizona were more likely to be reported by mothers to have visited than those children who lived farther away (Arditti, 2003; Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002). This was unsurprising considering the time, money and access to transportation that is needed to visit a prisoner.

Lastly, children of mothers who were housed in a minimum-security unit were more likely to be reported to have visited than children whose mothers were housed in medium, close or maximum-security units. This was anticipated in that higher security units employ more invasive visitation protocols, perhaps dissuading some caregivers

from taking children to visit (Arditti, 2012; Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2008; Hairston, 2003). It is important, however, to clarify the implications of this finding pertaining to prisoner security level and that of offense type. As explained earlier in this dissertation, prisoner classification scores are based on multiple criteria (e.g., criminal history, institutional behavior, inmate needs, gang affiliation) and not solely a result of offense type. That is, minimum-security inmates are not all drug or property offenders just as violent offenders are not all maximum-security offenders.

**Paternal incarceration.** As hypothesized in light of prior work, children had a higher probability of being reported by incarcerated fathers to have visited when their primary caregiver was a mother rather than another caregiver (i.e. other relative, non-relative, state custody) (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Roy & Dyson, 2005). A possible theoretical explanation for this finding can be drawn from research on romantic and family relationships among disadvantaged parents. To explain, in inner-city communities where imprisonment is rampant, men who are consistently present and engaged as fathers are scarce (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Roy & Burton, 2007). Despite this unfortunate reality, the mothers of these men's children often maintain traditional fathering expectations with respect to providing care and financial support (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Roy & Dyson, 2005). Regrettably, such expectations often go unmet and these women have little control in altering these dynamics.

Once a father is incarcerated, however, the power dynamics between the mother of the children and the father shift (Swanson et al., 2013). In exchange for economic and social support while in prison, these mothers can initiate a relationship between their

children and their children's father through visitation, while potentially laying out expectations for fatherhood post-release (Cecil et al., 2008; Day et al., 2005). While the children, mothers and prisoners connect during visitation, a sense of 'home' and 'family' is often created which can give rise to "idealized expectations" of these men as fathers and/or partners (Comfort, 2008; Roy & Dyson, 2005). In consideration of the criminal histories of these fathers, the low rate of marriage and relationship stability among the incarcerated population (Edin & Nelson, 2013), I contend that the reasons highlighted above, which are grounded in prior work, might account for why mothers were the more likely facilitators of father-reported child prison visitation relative to non-parent caregivers.

Similar to that of maternal incarceration cases, a potential interpretation of why other caregiver types (i.e. other relatives, non-relatives, state custody) were less likely to facilitate paternal prison visits than were mothers might also reflect the "good mother" hypothesis. That is, children experiencing paternal incarceration, who are not in the care of their mothers, are experiencing dual parental absence. For children residing with non-parent caregivers, it can be argued that efforts to facilitate parental contact will first be targeted towards the absent mother rather than the incarcerated father in light of the "good mother" role that women are expected to play (Arditti, 2012; Zatz, 2000).

The same case can be made for children in foster care. Indeed, child welfare systems are mostly women-centered such that parental obligations largely fall on the shoulders of mothers (Lenox, 2011; Swann & Sylvester, 2006). Given the high rate of uninvolved fathers in children's lives, father-child prison contact is arguably an unlikely

priority for non-mother caregivers. While not empirically tested directly, I posit that these reasons may theoretically explain the relationship between caregiver type and paternal-reported prison visits.

Among the various child situational factors, parent stressors and institutional barriers included in the logistic regression model, only prior parental involvement was found to be a significant predictor of father-child prison visits. Specifically, children whose fathers were more involved in their lives before imprisonment (e.g., living together, daily care, financial support) were more likely to be reported to have visited their fathers in prison than children whose fathers were less involved. In these cases, fathers were likely in relationships with the children's mothers and served more "traditional" fathering roles (e.g., breadwinner). As such, maintaining familial connections through prison visitation is a means by which the family can remain intact during the imprisonment period (Christian, 2005; Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Hairston, 2003).

Among the child demographics included in the model as controls, race/ethnicity emerged as significantly associated with the probability of paternal-reported prison visitation. In particular, results revealed that Latino/a children and American Indian children were less likely to be reported to have visited than were African American children (there were no statistically significant differences between White and African American children). Although the focus of this analysis was not on race, I put forth several potential explanations that might account for these findings that future research should explore.

Specifically, I attribute these findings to likely differences in visitation eligibility and commuting distances. For instance, in order to visit an inmate in the Arizona Department of Corrections, the visitor (children included) must show a government-issued form of identification (e.g., driver's license, passport, permanent resident alien card). For undocumented caregivers and/or children, then, visiting a prisoner is not possible. Thus, this may be a reason why Latino/as children were less likely to visit their fathers than African Americans.

For American Indian children, on the other hand, their lower likelihood of visitation compared to African Americans may be attributed to particularly far commuting distances from respective Native American reservations. While there are tribal lands throughout Arizona, the largest tribe in the entire country—the Navajo Nation—resides along the northern Arizona border. This reservation is particularly remote and is located quite far from ADC prison complexes. To put this in perspective, the Navajo Indian reservation is located approximately 300 miles from the city of Florence, Arizona that is home to multiple male prison complexes. And, the Navajo Nation is located more than 450 miles from the prison complexes in the southern portion of the state. Coupled with the high level of economic disadvantage among this population, this may account for why American Indian children were less likely to visit a father in prison than were African American children. Future research should investigate these race effects more closely; and in particular, examine interactions among race/ethnicity and key variables of interest.



In sum, although a number of studies exist on the relationship dynamics between prisoners and their adult visitors, there has been limited research conducted on parental prison visitation (Turney, 2014). In an effort to fill that void, this study was able to identify specific family systems most likely to engage in prison visits with incarcerated mothers and fathers—critical to reentry efforts. After controlling for a host of child situational factors, child demographics, parent stressors, and institutional barriers, results revealed that grandmothers (during maternal incarceration) and mothers (during paternal incarceration) were the most likely facilitators of prisoner-reported prison visitation relative to other caregivers. This finding was in line with expectations as the unique attachments between certain types of caregivers (i.e. grandmothers, mothers) and prisoners—which may be lacking among other respective caregiver types—might account for why grandmothers and mothers were the most likely to facilitate maternal and paternal prison visits. It should be pointed out, however, that for children in state placements, prison visitation with parents may not have been permitted or feasible. Considered together, these results provide valuable insight into which children, and under what circumstances, interact with the penal system.

### **Child Responses to Prison Visitation**

As revealed in analyses of caregiver reports of child responses and detailed accounts that followed (chapter 5), children’s reactions to parental prison visitation were overwhelmingly negative. In fact, nearly two-thirds of children demonstrated negative responses to the visitation encounter, as perceived by caregivers. Visitation responses were largely expressed through strong emotional reactions (e.g., anger, excessive crying,

depression, anxiety), although some children exhibited negative behavioral responses as well (e.g., acting out). Among the roughly one-third of children who displayed positive reactions to visiting an imprisoned parent, caregivers described children as excited, well-behaved, and having a positive attitude.

Thematic content analyses were conducted to capture major themes that accounted for child responses based on caregiver accounts. In particular, I was interested in investigating the role of visitation paradox factors (e.g., parental attachment, secondary prisonization) in how children fared with respect to parental prison visitation. Second, I explored the influence of pre-incarceration life circumstances (e.g., stressors) on how children responded to interaction with a parent in the prison setting. And lastly, I assessed potential age-graded effects in children's reactions to parental prison visits.

Support was found for Arditti's (2012) theoretical notion of the visitation paradox, in that both the institutional context and parental attachment accounted for how children who visited their parent in prison fared. In fact, nearly 18% of children's responses were attributed by caregivers to be linked to both context and attachment. While both factors were undoubtedly important and very much overlap, the institutional context surfaced as the most influential, however.

To illustrate, among 40 children, 73% of responses were attributed by caregivers to institutional factors—consistent with the secondary prisonization perspective and other previous work (Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2008). Out of these cases, 69% of children demonstrated negative responses whereas only 31% of children responded positively to the visit. Specific institutional factors that accounted for these responses by caregivers

included fear of the prison environment (e.g., barbed wire fences, loud metal gates), invasive security procedures (e.g., search canines), stern staff and limited interpersonal contact.

On the other hand, 45% of the 40 children in the sample displayed reactions to prison visits that were explained by levels of parental attachment. Among these cases, 56% of children responded negatively and 44% responded positively to the visit, based on caregiver reports. Children who had strained parental attachments tended to respond negatively to the visit encounter whereas children who had strong parental attachments often reacted positively. Parental attachment was typically attributed by caregivers to the level of prior involvement and closeness between children and their parent before incarceration. In light of the complicated dynamics experienced by many of these vulnerable family systems (Giordano, 2010; Turanovic et al., 2012), it is of no surprise that many children had difficulty coping with these strained parental attachments and subsequently reacted negatively when face-to-face with their parent in the visiting room.

In summary, I set out to broadly explore children's reactions to parental prison visitation. In conducting my investigation, I captured all behavioral and emotional responses exhibited by children in response to the visit, as reported by their primary caregivers. Given my theoretical focus on the visitation paradox (Arditti, 2012), I made no assumptions about whether children would respond positively or negatively to prison visitation. My results revealed, however, that children reacted overwhelmingly negatively.

The two key factors that accounted for this finding were the institutional context and parental attachments, lending support to prior work (Arditti, 2012; Christian & Kennedy, 2011; Comfort, 2008; Poehlmann et al., 2008). Although I extended this paradox to include child age and pre-incarceration stressors, these factors did not emerge as significant in terms of affecting how children responded to prison visitation. Overall, these results illustrate the power of context and family relations—that are highly interrelated and dynamic in nature—in shaping children’s reactions to the visiting experience.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

This research makes several key theoretical contributions to the broader collateral consequences of incarceration literature. An important theoretical dimension of this dissertation is its focus on *diverse family systems*. The majority of previous studies have examined the consequences of imprisonment for individual children or prisoners (either on paternal children or on African American men), but have not fully considered how these individuals’ embeddedness within highly complicated family systems might shape various outcomes. In contrast, I found that children from certain types of family systems were more likely to have contact with an imprisoned parent, and subsequently have exposure to the penal environment. Moreover, my research further illustrated how the types of family systems most likely to visit varied by the gender of the imprisoned parent. As such, taking a family approach to research on the consequences of imprisonment can shed important light on how outcomes might differ across individuals.

An additionally significant theoretical contribution of this research is my ability to understand family life *before* imprisonment (e.g., prior parental involvement, parental stressors) and what it means for family connectedness *during* incarceration—all of which has implications for family functioning *after* imprisonment. Existing research has rarely been able to comprehensively capture pre-incarceration factors that allow researchers to situate in-prison contact within broader family dynamics and circumstances (Phillips et al., 2006; Tasca et al., 2014). In so doing, I was able to more systematically assess the circumstances under which parental prison visitation occurs and its impact on children. Furthermore, my focus on prison visitation allowed for insight into the functioning of vulnerable families most affected by crime and imprisonment during a key period of parental absence about which we know relatively little.

My empirical test of the visitation paradox (Arditti, 2012) in assessing children’s responses to parental prison visitation also advances theory in several key respects. First, by including elements from both attachment and secondary prisonization perspectives, this research was able to form an interdisciplinary bridge between human development and criminology. For example, it is necessary to consider that children who visit are embedded within families—with varying levels of parental attachments—that are interacting with parents within correctional contexts. And as was revealed by my findings, both secondary prisonization and attachment elements mattered, thereby illustrating how an interdisciplinary theoretical approach is an important contribution to this line of inquiry.

Second, not only did I empirically test Arditti's (2012) theoretical concept of the visitation paradox, I was able to extend it in my examination of how children who visited an imprisoned parent fared. Specifically, my analysis included an examination of pre-incarceration life circumstances and child age, which advanced both attachment and secondary prisonization perspectives, even though these factors were not found to be empirically significant. Attachment theory traditionally assumes that parents (mostly focused on mothers) and children are inherently closely bonded (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980) and, as a result, prison visitation is positive for children in that visits can ease the trauma associated with parental separation (Poehlmann, 2005b). As was revealed in my findings, however, levels of parental attachments varied significantly across children and imprisoned parents. Given that children's relationships with these prisoners are often highly complicated by pre-incarceration stressors and circumstances, it is theoretically important to incorporate these factors into an attachment framework.

Finally, I was able to advance the secondary prisonization framework (Clemmer, 1958; Comfort, 2008; Sykes, 1958) through the inclusion of child age. Traditionally, a secondary prisonization perspective posits that visitors' exposure to the prison context is inherently negative, in that visitors are transformed by the punitive nature of the institution (Comfort, 2008). Under this line of reasoning, then, children visiting an imprisoned parent would react negatively to visits given their exposure to this environment. Theoretically, however, there was reason to believe that children—depending upon their stage of development—might have responded to the penal environment differently (Poehlmann et al., 2008). As such, child age is a significant

theoretical addition to the secondary prisonization perspective even though age-effects were not uncovered empirically.

### **Empirical Contributions**

There are several empirical strengths of this study that are worth noting. First, I examined data collected from a representative sample of incarcerated parents. This is important in that the majority of data collected from incarcerated parents are drawn from convenience samples (e.g., inmates in one unit, inmates participating in a specific program). Rather, these data come from a randomly identified sample of male and female prisoners who self-identified as being the parent of at least one minor child. This resulted in a group of incarcerated mothers and fathers who varied across classification level, criminal history, sentence length, and other key demographics. Similarly, caregivers (sampled from prisoner reports) also varied across relationship to children, caregiving experiences, and other important characteristics. Over 90% of prisoners and caregivers, who were contacted participated in the study, which further adds to the strength of these data.

Additionally, I was able to examine the likelihood of parental prison visits and their impact on children using data from two different raters (i.e. prisoners, caregivers) and using two distinctive methods. Considering the complexities of these family systems, examining data from both prisoners and caregivers strengthens the current analyses. Likewise, the ability to examine a large dataset that contained a comprehensive set of variables including child situational factors, parent stressors, and institutional measures among children of incarcerated mothers and fathers (reported by prisoners) in predicting

parental prison visitation is an important empirical contribution. Indeed, most research does not include both maternal and paternal incarceration cases, pre-incarceration life circumstances and institutional factors in the same study. Lastly, the qualitative data used in my analyses provided rich, detailed caregiver accounts on children’s emotional and behavioral responses to visits with imprisoned parents. This method provided nuanced insight into institutional and familial processes—as well as their intersections—that might have been missed if caregivers were bound by categorical responses, particularly considering that so little is known about children’s experiences with prison visitation.

### **Limitations**

As with all research, there are several limitations to this study that must be noted. First, I was unable to capture prison visitation among incarcerated fathers during the current prison term. As discussed in-depth in chapter 3, men were interviewed at intake and therefore were not yet eligible for visits at the time of data collection. As a result, fathers who had served a prior imprisonment term in ADC were asked about visitation with their children during their most recent prior incarceration. Considering the limited research on paternal prison visitation, tapping into father-child prison visits—even during a prior term—is still undoubtedly important. At the same time, however, not being able to account for whether or not 43% of fathers in the sample who were serving their first prison sentence received visits from their children is a limitation of the current study. This is true in light of potential differences between these two groups of fathers that may affect the probability of visitation. As revealed in the methods chapter (see footnote #5), I compared fathers with prior prison histories to those who were serving their first terms



across multiple characteristics. Fathers who had served at least one prior prison term (the 171 fathers of the 300 fathers included in the present analysis) were less likely to have committed a public order offense, more likely to be property offenders, slightly older, and were more likely to be African American than those fathers without prior prison records.

Children may be more likely to visit a father who is serving his first prison stint relative to children whose father has been in and out of the prison system. This might be due to the possibility that the extent of a father's criminal justice system involvement impacts the strength of parental attachments. While I did not find that the number of prison terms served among previously incarcerated fathers affected whether or not children visited, differences may exist between first-time and repeat offenders.

Accordingly, future research should be expanded to consider paternal visitation patterns among incarcerated fathers with or without prior prison histories.

A second limitation to this study is that these data do not contain a continuous measure of prison visitation (Cochran & Mears, 2013). While prisoners were asked about the frequency of child visitation using an ordinal scale (i.e. never, daily, weekly, at least once per month, less than once per month), there was insufficient variation to assess parent-child visitation patterns (see footnote #9 in chapter 3). Similarly, patterns of prison visitation were not systematically captured in caregiver accounts of children's visitation reactions. Moreover, asking prisoners or caregivers to recall visitation frequency is arguably less reliable than official records that were unfortunately unavailable. In any event, whether or not children visit their imprisoned parents is an important question, but

understanding which children visit often also needs to be examined as visitation frequency could be related to how children respond to visits.

Third, these data were collected from interviews with two different raters (i.e. prisoners and caregivers). Although desirable in several respects, as discussed earlier, there are limitations to relying upon self-report data from these sources. For instance, in the quantitative analyses on the likelihood of prison visitation, data came from interviews with incarcerated parents that were based upon prisoners' knowledge of their children's whereabouts and status, which may not have been as accurate or up-to-date as caregiver reports would have been. In addition, to capture prison visitation, we relied upon prisoners' abilities to recall visitation patterns with their children—a particular challenge among incarcerated fathers referring to their prior confinement period. Unfortunately, however, at the time of data collection, an official visitation measure was not systematically and electronically available from ADC.

Likewise, qualitative analyses on children's responses to prison visits relied upon data comprised from caregiver accounts. Caregiver perceptions of child reactions to parental visitation may have differed from those of the children themselves. Furthermore, it is unknown if or how caregiver's own feelings towards visitation might have influenced the responses of the children. Interviewing children who visit their incarcerated parents directly could help to identify any potential discrepancies between caregiver and child perceptions of children's reactions to prison visitation. Still, the adult "outsider" perspective of the caregiver is an undoubtedly important one.

It is important to point out, though, that there are trade-offs in the use of different data sources and there are varying norms across disciplines with respect to this process. For instance, our ability to collect data from two raters (i.e. prisoners and caregivers) allowed for valuable insight into family life during parental imprisonment from two distinct perspectives using two distinct methods—which is relatively rare in the field of criminology. Interviewing prisoners and caregivers enabled us to collect information on children across all age groups; that would not have been possible if we interviewed children directly (e.g., toddlers). Also, the interviewing of children enacts unique institutional review board requirements in which the dialogue with the children might not have been able to be as encompassing as was the case with prisoner interviews or as open-ended as was the case in caregiver interviews.

Next, with respect to the qualitative analyses on children’s responses to parental prison visits, this study relied upon a small, purposive sample of 40 children—a subset of the larger sample. Moreover, given that children in these data are nested within families, I only included one focal child from each of the selected cases to ensure that children were the unit of analysis. In so doing, corresponding siblings were excluded from analysis. While these data provided rich, detailed accounts of the visitation experience and various life circumstances from the perspective of the caregiver, additional research is needed using a larger number of children that also compares potential differences in responses to visitation across siblings.

Finally, the current study is conducted within one state—Arizona. As such, it is unknown if the results found in these analyses are generalizable to other jurisdictions. For

instance, it is unknown the extent to which the visitation settings, policies or procedures are similar or distinct from other prison systems. Considering the importance of secondary prisonization elements in how children responded to parental prison visits in this study, investigations across prison systems should be conducted to determine if the effects of the institutional context remains.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Additional research is needed in several key areas to further advance our theoretical and empirical understanding of the factors associated with, and impact of, prison visitation for children during parental imprisonment. As noted previously, future studies should include continuous measures of prison visitation between mothers, fathers and their children to identify *patterns* of contact. Similarly, research is needed that can situate each visitation event within the confinement timeline (e.g., visits early in prison term, visits near release, consistent visits throughout prison term) (see Cochran, 2014; Cochran & Mears, 2013). Identifying patterns of parental prison visitation and determining under what circumstances such patterns occur can shed important light on various child outcomes but also on prisoner-specific outcomes such as misconduct, well-being and recidivism.

Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that prisoners who receive visits from adult partners or family members during specific time points during incarceration are less likely to engage in inmate misconduct, have improved psychological well-being and are less likely to recidivate (Cochran, 2012; Cochran, Mears, Bales & Stewart, 2012; Roxburgh & Fitch, 2013; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). Whether visitation with

children produces similarly positive prisoner outcomes, however, is poorly understood. In fact, one study revealed that as prison visits from children increased, so did the likelihood of prisoner recidivism, although the authors noted that the reasons for this are unclear (Bales & Mears, 2008). It may be that when prisoners are visited often by their children and their children's caregiver, the promises made by the prisoner during these visits may be too great for him or her to keep upon release. Subsequently, the pressure of these "idealized expectations" may contribute to his or her subsequent return to prison. In consideration of these possibilities, future research that taps into the nature and consequences of expectations placed on these incarcerated parents is very much needed.

Moreover, additional studies should examine the effect of visitation on the likelihood of parent-child reunification. Such an inquiry will provide important insight into how parental connections during imprisonment impact family life post-incarceration. In some cases, visitation may have provided an opportunity to resolve prior conflicts and a chance to bond with children, thereby strengthening family relationships in reentry. Alternatively, caregivers—in their role as gatekeepers—may become aware during visitation encounters of the numerous challenges that lie ahead for the prisoner upon release and thus discourage parental reunification. An entirely separate hypothesis involves the possibility that, for some families, parent-child contact might only take place behind prison walls in that this may be the only time the prisoner is willing, sober and available. In thinking about cases when children met their father for the first time during imprisonment, it remains to be seen whether contact will continue once the father reenters

the community. Therefore, the link (or lack thereof) between visitation and post-release reunification deserves empirical exploration.

More research is also needed on families who don't visit and the reasons behind their lack of contact. For instance, some caregivers may have the means to visit but choose not to, yet the specific motivations behind their decisions are unclear. Further, criminal records and the undocumented status of caregivers and/or children are real barriers to prison visitation that we know very little about, which may have important implications for family functioning. And, among those children who don't visit, how do they respond to the lack of contact with their imprisoned parent? Thus, empirical inquiry into non-visiting families is needed to be able to assess how families who visit fare relative to those who do not.

Finally, children's reactions to visitation with an imprisoned parent should be assessed through multiple methods across multiple institutional contexts. As mentioned earlier, interviews with children about their own feelings towards visitation should be used to gather additional knowledge about the way in which visitation impacts children of incarcerated mothers and fathers. Another method that can be used to assess child responses is that of observations in the visiting room. Using field observation techniques, researchers should observe the emotional and behavioral responses of children visiting a parent. Relying on more than one researcher enhances inter-rater reliability and this method also eliminates any potential family member bias. Employing numerous data collection methods in different prison systems (e.g., state prison systems, federal prison system) across varying security levels (e.g., minimum, medium, maximum) can further

advance empirical knowledge that is needed to inform evidence-based policy and practice pertaining to visitation.

### **Policy Implications**

This dissertation research has multiple implications for correctional policy and practice. First, the current focus on caregiver type in the examination of factors associated with parent-child prison visitation has identified specific family systems to be targeted in reentry initiatives. Specifically, for male prisoners who are parents of minor children, institutional and community correctional systems should make efforts to include mother caregivers and children in leading up to and during the reentry phase. The same is true in maternal incarceration cases in which attempts should be made to integrate grandmother caregivers and children in reentry plans. In order to provide specific recommendations on how this can be achieved, let me first describe existing reentry processes.

Six months prior to an inmate's release from the Arizona Department of Corrections, a pre-release "packet" that contains information on the inmate's risk level, as well as the address where the prisoner will reside upon release, is forwarded to the designated parole officer who will oversee the prisoner's community supervision for the remaining 15% of his or her sentence (given truth-in-sentencing laws). Prior to the prisoner's release, the parole officer assigned to the inmate's case will make a visit to the address provided by the inmate in his or her pre-release packet—to either approve or deny the prisoner residing at that address. This visit is the only "contact" that the parole officer will have with any potential family members because once the inmate is released,

he or she must report to the parole officer directly as part of supervision (the frequency of which is determined by level of risk). In addition to the standard rules of avoiding law enforcement contact, refraining from interacting with other felons and maintaining full-time employment or enrollment in higher education, the prisoner must submit to random urinalysis testing, pay a predetermined “fee” to the parole officer and show up to scheduled meetings to report any changes in status to his or her parole officer. In other words, there is no “treatment” component or family involvement in community supervision for Arizona parolees.

Since family support is a key component of successful reentry, it is critical that the individuals most involved with the prisoner during his or her incarceration are included in a post-release transition plan. As such, the Arizona Department of Corrections may want to partner with nonprofit agencies that are equipped to serve the reentry population with parole officers providing referrals to prisoners, caregivers and children for family services upon release. Such services might include family counseling, financial resources and parenting classes.

From a practical perspective, children and caregivers who have visited the incarcerated parent—relying upon official ADC visitation records—can be used to identify potential referrals when the prisoner’s pre-release packet is compiled. Prior to the inmate’s release but after a pre-release packet has been submitted, the parole officer should attempt to reach out to these caregivers to introduce him or herself and discuss the services that the family and prisoner can receive upon the prisoner’s release. Having parole officers meet with and provide family service referrals to these caregivers can



provide a more personal connection with the prisoner's broader support network that likely has a vested interest in the prisoner's success (regardless if the prisoner is residing in the caregiver's home). Including these "stakeholders" in the prisoner's community supervision—which would involve a treatment component—may increase the likelihood of success. Even more, in consideration of the burdens that caregivers carry and the various expectations placed on prisoners upon release, employing family-centric interventions has the potential to enhance family functioning, thereby enabling prisoners and their families to cope more successfully with the realities of life after incarceration.

Although such reentry efforts are essential, financial and therapeutic resources directed at caregivers and children during parental incarceration are also needed. Grandmother and mother caregivers of children of incarcerated parents are often the most strained of all caregiver types (Denby, 2012; Geller et al., 2011; Hanlon et al., 2007). As such, funds should be allocated to serve these specific family systems, even for temporary periods of time. For instance, the State of Arizona used to provide grandparents who were raising their grandchildren a small monthly guardianship subsidy during a parent's imprisonment. Many grandparent caregivers who participated in this study discussed how helpful this subsidy was in providing for children's needs and in helping to facilitate parental prison contact. Unfortunately, budget cuts have largely eliminated this benefit for non-foster families. Reinstating and expanding this benefit could potentially ease the burdens faced by these vulnerable families.

At the same time, financial assistance is not the only resource that caregivers and children need. As discussed previously, relationships between children, caregivers and

prisoners are highly complex and are often plagued by a great deal of conflict (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Owen, 1998; Turanovic et al., 2012). This is evidenced by children's adverse reactions to prison visitation attributed to strained parental attachments.

Accordingly, family services are needed to help work through these complexities to promote healthy family functioning. Unfortunately, the prison visitation room is often families' only opportunity to confront these issues, and these interactions occur in the absence of any formal intervention. A possible policy solution to address this includes making counseling services available through nonprofit organizations or through agreements between Medicaid and private counseling agencies for families during parental incarceration. Thus, targeting family systems during and after incarceration could potentially lead to improved outcomes.

Other policy recommendations stemming from this study are specific to the prison setting. Given the high rate of negative child responses to prison visitation attributed to the institutional climate, it is important to consider the ways in which visitation could be more welcoming to families. Such policies might include the training of staff to adopt a child-sensitive approach to visits and creation of child-friendly visitation rooms in which age-appropriate books and games are available. On the other hand, policy recommendations pertaining to security procedures are not as straightforward in that the use of search canines and metal detectors are central to the safety and security of the institution. While these procedures may be necessary, staff and visiting rooms that are child-friendly may reduce some of the anxiety children experience when entering carceral settings to visit a parent.

Importantly, this research also contributes to current policy discussions on the use of video visitation—a key issue in correctional policy today (Visher & Courtney, 2007). Various prison systems and local jails have implemented video visitation as an alternative to traditional face-to-face contact. In fact, the U.S. Department of Justice has recently funded a large-scale study that examines the impact of video visitation on various outcomes in light of the increasing reliance on this technology. This policy is not without controversy, however. Opponents of video visitation contend that this method of contact weakens families’ abilities to maintain bonds given shortened visiting times, limited privacy, and lack of interpersonal contact. Alternatively, advocates of this policy argue that video visitation reduces the strain on visitors by decreasing commutes and costs associated with visitation (e.g., gas, money for vending machines) and decrease the potential for drugs and other contraband from entering correctional facilities.

In light of the results of the current study that found children overwhelmingly responded negatively to parental prison visitation, video visits might be a desirable *option* for families who visit with minor children. To explain, several video visitation “test” sites could be set up in various locations in order to be an accessible option to visitors across the state. An evaluation (conducted by independent researchers) could be conducted over the course of one to two years to gauge how often video visitation is utilized among visitors as well as assess children’s responses to visits across the two methods. Indeed, some caregivers who participated in the present study expressed interest in video visitation given the adverse responses of children to traditional visitation. As such,

additional research should be conducted to identify prison visitation methods that are the least harmful to children.

## **Conclusion**

This research contributes theoretically and empirically to the collateral consequences of incarceration literature by providing a window into the imprisonment experience for vulnerable families. The bottom line is that a sizeable number of American families—predominately the most disadvantaged among us—have encountered incarceration in some way. This study was able to tap into these families’ abilities to remain connected and how children fare as a result of these connections, thereby providing valuable insights into family functioning among prisoners, caregivers and children during confinement.

Ultimately, this dissertation raises pertinent questions surrounding what it means to have family relationships manifest in *prison*. For the majority of middle-class Americans, such a possibility is a foreign concept, a phenomenon that happens to “them” and not “us”. But for many families in our poorest neighborhoods and barrios, this experience has become far too common. In some cases, children were meeting their parent for the first time during prison visitation; in other cases, children were reconnecting during visits with a parent who had been in and out of their lives for most of their childhood. On the other hand, there were some children whose parental attachments to their imprisoned mothers or fathers were strong, and where the parent’s current incarceration was but a misstep on an otherwise conventional path—but unfortunately this was more often the exception than the rule.

A major highlight of this study is the investment many overly burdened mother and grandmother caregivers put into prisoners through their facilitation of parent-child prison visits and the largely negative impacts on children that results from such efforts. Sadly, however, in light of strained familial relationships and in the absence of treatment resources, the likelihood that the investment of time, energy and money that prison visitation requires will pay off is slim. What potential long-term impacts of exposure to parents through the prison system have for young children growing into adolescence and then adulthood remain unknown.

On a more positive note, there is emerging evidence to suggest that a period of “mass decarceration” may be underway (Clear & Burrell, 2012). Moreover, some promising changes to drug policy have also been recently implemented at both state and federal levels (e.g., legalized marijuana, reduced crack-vs-cocaine sentencing disparities). The scope of such policy shifts remains to be seen, however. Until then, it is important to remember, as a caregiver in our sample said it best, prison visitation—the only opportunity to meaningfully connect during imprisonment—is by no means “cupcakes and lollipops.”

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